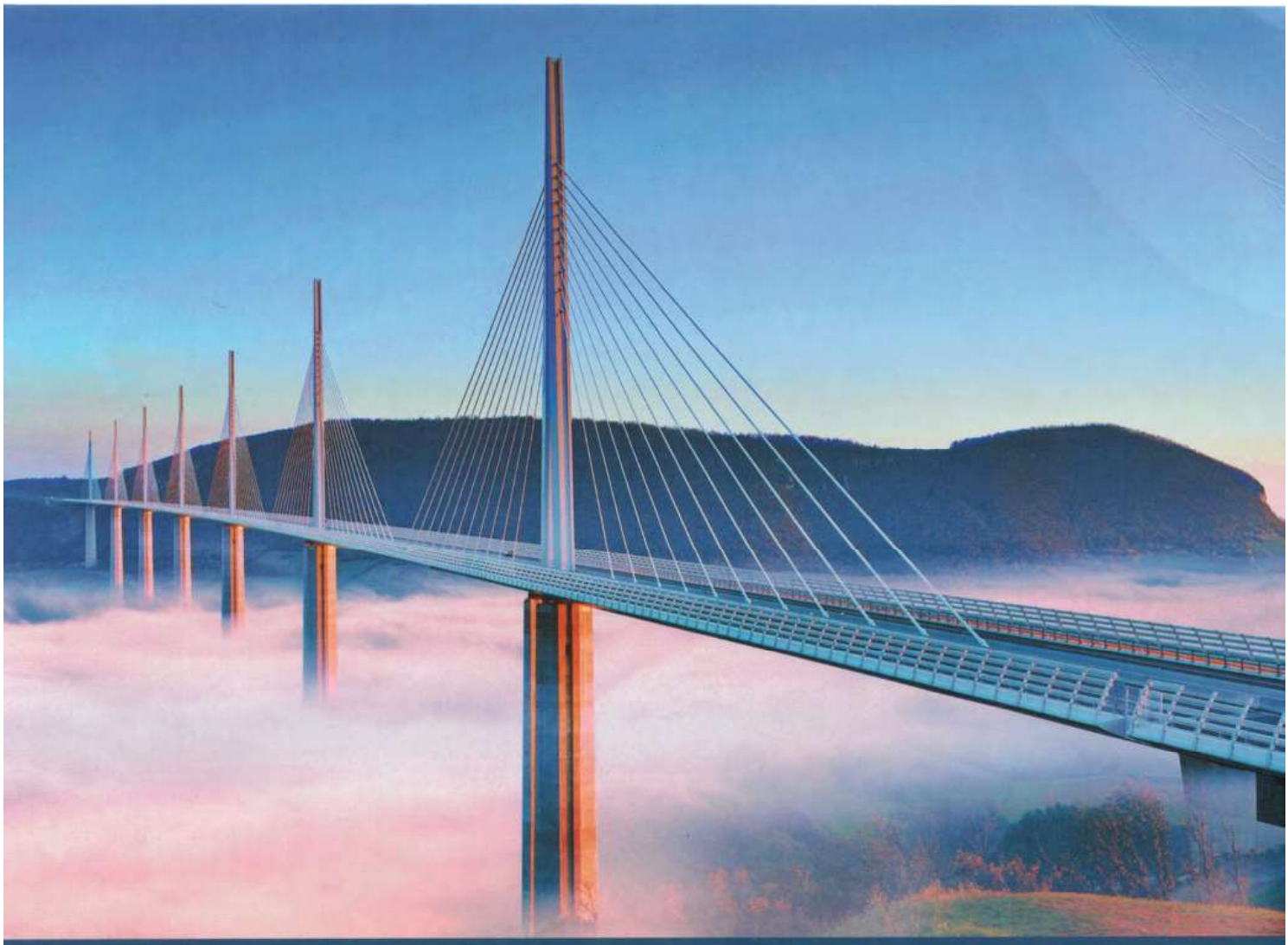

Learning Teaching

The Essential Guide to English Language Teaching

THIRD EDITION

Jim Scrivener

MACMILLAN BOOKS FOR TEACHERS

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Chapter 9 Productive skills: speaking and writing

This chapter examines the two productive skills and looks at ways to approach them in the classroom.

1 Approaches to speaking

Task 9.1 Problems in organising discussion classes

You are a student in a foreign language class. A new teacher comes in, stares at the class and says *Today we're going to talk about oil pollution. What do you think?*

Following the teacher's question, some of your fellow classmates look down at their tables, make faces at each other and keep silent. The teacher tries to encourage them to speak, and, in doing so, talks more and more himself. At the end, none of you have said a single word and the teacher sits down exhausted and mumbles to himself, *Well, that seemed to go OK.*

1 How did you feel as a student?
2 Why might you not have felt like taking part in the discussion?
3 What advice would you give to your teacher when planning future lessons of this type?

Commentary

The truth is that a discussion lesson like the one described in this task is more likely to produce silence or a desultory sentence or two than a scorching debate. Why this happens is not too hard to fathom. As a student in that lesson you probably had no interest in the subject, no relevant knowledge or experience, no motivation, no desire or perceived need to speak about it and worst of all, a slight panic: 'The teacher wants me to say something and I haven't had time to think.' Hence, as a result of all of these, there was nothing to say.

If we want to get students talking in class, we need to answer all these objections. If the subject is relevant and interesting, if the students already know about or are provided with information to give substance to the topic, if they feel motivated to talk about it, if they feel that they really want to say something, there is a good chance of something interesting happening.

So, how can we help the teacher from Task 9.1 organise their speaking lessons better? Here are some suggestions.

- **Topic and cues**
  At its simplest, you (or learners) would possibly bring to class a topic (eg 'banning smoking' or 'globalisation'), as well as a cue (eg in the form of a short newspaper article or a provocative question) that will serve to help spark conversation. Most of the lesson would then be taken up with discussing this, stating and comparing views. There might be little or no explicit 'teaching' of grammatical or vocabulary points. In planning the lesson, it would be a good idea to prepare a number of further cues (eg a follow-on article or question) to keep in reserve in order to move the discussion forward if it starts to drag.

- **Structuring talk**
  Your main role will be to structure the talk, making sure that all learners get a chance to participate, trying to prevent it getting boring, occasionally adding to the discussion itself in order to keep it interesting. It is likely that you will generally want to reduce your own participation level; the more you talk, the less space there is for learners to say something.
- **Avoiding the talk–talk loop**
  There is a danger of getting locked into a 'talk–talk loop', in which you say something, but because there is no response from the learners, you say something else, and again with no response you add something else, etc. It takes a little courage initially, but you will usually get far more conversation out of a class by asking one clear question and then shutting up – and patiently allowing even quite a long silence, while learners formulate what they want to say. Repeatedly adding new comments or new questions can have the opposite effect to that intended, confusing the class and closing down people who were planning to speak.
- **Open questions**
  A key technique will be to use 'open questions' (eg *where, what, who, why, how, when* questions that require a longer answer) rather than 'closed questions' (eg verb–subject questions that require nothing more than *yes* or *no*). For example, instead of 'Is noise pollution a bad thing?', you could ask 'What do you think about noise pollution?' Focusing on specific issues is even more likely to encourage reactions, for example 'When they make that noise with the drill outside, how do you feel?'
- **Playing devil's advocate**
  One useful intervention you can make is to sometimes play 'devil's advocate' (ie deliberately taking an opposing or contrasting viewpoint in order to spur on conversation).

Task 9.2 Ways to start a lively discussion

Which of these activities (all based on the idea of discussing recent news) is likely to give learners a good opportunity to speak and encourage as many to speak as possible?

1 Small talk at the start of the lesson: the whole class chats about recent events.
2 You write a controversial question based on the day's news on the board. The class work in groups of four or five students to discuss it.
3 Pairs of learners have different pictures cut from today's newspaper (which they don't show each other). They compare their views, initially describing their two pictures.
4 Everyone is given the name of a famous person (which they keep secret). The whole class stands up and walks around (as if at a party), meeting, chatting and answering questions about recent events 'in character'.

Commentary

All these activities seem to likely fulfil the goals to some degree – and, by the way, also make use of four common groupings (whole class seated, small groups, pairs, whole class mingling).

In terms of the numbers of people speaking, it is mathematically true that the whole-class activity will allow a smaller number of people to be speaking at the same time, whereas the last activity, in which participants work individually, is

likely to provide opportunity for the most speaking by the largest number of people. Whether learners feel encouraged to speak also depends on how motivated they feel by the task. Having a clear, concrete task (eg describing a photo or answering a specific question) may offer a more manageable starting point than a general invitation to 'state your view'. Similarly, having a 'role' may give learners permission to speak more freely, taking away some of the nervousness associated with formulating one's own view.

Fluency and confidence

Fluency and confidence are important goals when considering speaking lessons. There is no point knowing a lot about language if you can't use it (which, sadly, has been the experience of many language learners in the past – able to conjugate a verb, but unable to respond to a simple question). To help achieve this aim, we often want to find ways of enabling as many students as possible to speak as much as possible. Sometimes an all-class speaking activity is useful, but if it takes up the whole lesson, it actually offers very little speaking time to each individual student. It's usually a good idea to organise speaking activities in pairs, threes and small groups, as well as with the class as a whole.

Task 9.3 Fluency and confidence aims

The aim for any conversation class is for learners to 'become more fluent and confident'. Why might learners need this (ie what may have prevented them becoming fluent)?

Commentary

Very often, when people study a language, they accumulate a lot of 'up-in-the-head' knowledge (ie they may know rules of grammar and lists of vocabulary items), but then find that they can't actually use this language to communicate when they want to. There seems to be some difficulty in moving language from 'up-there' knowledge to actively usable language. For many learners, their 'passive' knowledge is much larger than their 'active' language. Without experience in using the language, learners may tend to be nervous about trying to say things. Partly they may fear seeming foolish in front of others; they may worry about getting things wrong; they may want to avoid your comments or corrections; and so on. In addition to these, it may simply take a long time to 'put the pieces' of a communication together, leading to long embarrassed pauses while the learner tries to find out how to say what they want to say, perhaps while a ticket queue waits behind or a group of embarrassed friends look on.

One of the best ways for you to help learners activate this knowledge is to put them in 'safe' situations in class where they are inspired and encouraged to try using language from their 'store'. These would not mainly be activities that teach 'new' language; rather, they would allow learners to try out language that they already understand and have 'learned', but not yet made part of their active personal repertoire. Generally speaking, you are likely to want to create activities in which learners feel less worried about speaking, less under pressure, less nervous about trying things out. It's a fine balance though, as you also want learners to feel under some pressure to take a risk and use language that they may have been avoiding using until now.

Many activities in class are suitable for fulfilling these 'fluency and confidence' aims, but for the moment, let's stick with the class discussion such as might happen in a 'conversation class'.

Task 9.4 Activities that lead to fluency and confidence

This is a lesson aim: 'Learners will become more fluent – speaking more confidently with less hesitation.' Which of these activities might help fulfil this aim?

1 Learners repeat sentences you say.
2 At the start of the lesson, learners chat with you about their weekend plans.
3 Learners look at a list of hints and tips for making business presentations.
4 Learners listen to a recording and practise repeating words with the same difficult vowel sound.
5 Learners work in pairs and agree their list of the best five films of all time.
6 Learners listen to and study a recording of a social conversation.
7 Learners prepare a monologue about their hobbies and then give a five-minute speech to the whole class.
8 Learners learn by heart a list of useful chunks of language they can use in conversations.

Commentary

Arguably, all of these contribute in some degree towards the aim, though lesson stages that focus mainly on language repetition or language study are at best contributing foundation skills and knowledge rather than directly working on fluency itself. The activities that are primarily focused on encouraging fluency are numbers two and five.

A few keys to getting a good discussion going

- **Frame the discussion well**
  Don't just jump in the deep end (as the oil pollution example above did – 'Here's the topic, now TALK!'). It usually helps to find ways to lead in at the beginning and ways to close at the end. A lead-in may be no more than a brief focus on a picture; it could be a text that everyone reads and which naturally flows into the topic. It could be a personal recollection from you.
- **Preparation time**
  Your students may need some quiet time before the speaking activity, not to write out speeches (this is to be a speaking activity, not a reading aloud one), but perhaps to look up vocabulary in their dictionaries, think through their thoughts, make a note or two, etc.
- **Don't interrupt the flow**
  If at all possible, avoid classroom management techniques that interfere with the natural flow of conversation. I'm thinking particularly about learners having to put their hands up before they speak. Try alternatives such as keeping a watchful eye on the class and noticing those small movements and looks that suggest someone wants to speak, and then invite them to speak with a gesture or by a natural comment such as *Dasha, what do you think?*
- **Specific problems are more productive than general issues**
  Rather than giving the students a general topic to discuss, try setting a specific, related problem. This is often more challenging, more interesting and more realistic. In the oil pollution example, you could divide the students into two groups: managers of Reddo Tankers (a large multinational oil shipping company) and GreenEarth (a conservationist group) and tell them that they must decide (and agree) how to minimise the risk of pollution in future. Make it

more interesting by giving them some resource data, eg a page or two of essential information about the company, recent accidents, graphs, local newspaper articles, maps, etc.

- **Role cards**
  Giving students brief role cards sometimes helps, eg 'You are a motorist who uses Reddo petrol. Explain how you want to support green issues, but also need to drive your car.' It can often be easier to speak in someone else's character than in your own. (See Section 3 for more role play ideas.)
- **Buzz groups**
  If a whole-class discussion seems to be dying on its feet, try splitting the class up into 'buzz groups', ie quickly divide the class into small sets of four or five students. Ask them to summarise the discussion so far, particularly considering if they agree with what different people have said. After a few minutes (with students still in groups), ask them to think of three comments or questions that would be interesting to share with the whole class. Then bring the whole class back together and continue the discussion. The entire buzz-group stage may take only about three or four minutes, but can help inject a lot more energy into a discussion.
- **Break the rules**
  Don't feel that you can never bend the above rules; sometimes it may make sense to go straight into the discussion (perhaps because you want them to get some practice at unprepared speaking, or because the subject is burning so strongly that it just demands to be started immediately).

Task 9.5 Using material to generate discussion

Find a way to use this material in a discussion lesson. How would you introduce it? Would you need other materials? If so, what?

Commentary

A discussion could be based around a decision as to which of the three buildings should be built on the vacant site. The discussion would probably be a lot more interesting if the speakers had a real involvement in the issues. Role cards might be useful, say, for 'architects', 'local residents' and 'town council'. Some lively arguments could result.

The whole activity could be introduced with a discussion about any recent building or renovation work near the students' school, what students think about modern buildings in their town or what they think could be done with any local vacant plot.

How to organise learners in speaking tasks

Getting the physical arrangements right is often a big part of getting a speaking activity to work well. That may seem an obvious enough comment, but it's interesting how often teachers set up a group speaking activity and then, for example, leave students sitting in shoulder-to-shoulder lines.

It's hard to talk to someone you can't make eye contact with (though sometimes you may want to play around with this idea, for example, deliberately keeping students apart when practising 'phone calls').

Learners usually need to be able to:

- make eye contact with those they are speaking to;
- hear clearly what the other person / people are saying;
- be reasonably close together.

Different variations of seating / standing arrangements can be useful. Check ideas in Chapter 3, Section 3. Plan the arrangement carefully to match the requirements of the specific activity; for example, you may want an arrangement that allows students to talk secretly without other teams overhearing (eg making plans for a confrontational 'public inquiry' meeting to be held later in the lesson).

Task 9.6 **Devising a discussion activity**

The subject is 'pop festivals'. Devise a discussion activity suitable for a range of levels.

Commentary

One possible idea: in groups, plan a pop festival for our town. Who should be invited to play? Where would it be? What problems might there be? How will we keep the locals happy? Finally, design an advertisement poster to include important information and encourage visitors to come. At the end, the separate groups pin up their posters around the walls and visit each other's. In the role of potential visitors and festival organisers, they ask and answer questions.

2 Communicative activities

The discussions and conversations in Section 1 are examples of communicative activities, ie classroom activities designed so that learners speak and listen to one another.

We typically communicate when one of us has information (facts, opinions, ideas, instructions) that another does not have. This is known as an 'information gap'. The aim of a communicative activity in class is to get learners to use the language they are learning to interact in realistic and meaningful ways, usually involving exchanges of information or opinion.

Task 9.7 Communicative activities

Consider the definition above and tick which items on the following list are communicative activities.

1 Repeating sentences that you say
2 Doing oral grammar drills
3 Reading aloud from the coursebook
4 Giving a prepared speech
5 Acting out a scripted conversation
6 Giving instructions so that someone can use a new machine
7 Improvising a conversation so that it includes lots of examples of a new grammar structure
8 One learner describes a picture in the textbook while the others look at it

Commentary

By my definition, only activity 6 above is a communicative activity; it is the only one that involves a real exchange of information. Repetition, drills, speeches, etc all give useful oral practice, but they do not provide communication. In activity 6, one person knows something that another doesn't know and there is a need for this meaning to be transferred.

Activity 7 is excluded from the list because, in real communication, the language that the students use is largely unpredictable. There may be many ways to achieve a particular communicative goal. Communicative activities are not simply grammar practice activities, for although you could offer likely grammar or vocabulary before the activity, the main aim for the students is achieving successful communication rather than accurate use of particular items of language.

I exclude activity 8 because the communication is meaningless: why (other than in the classroom) would we listen to someone describing something we can see for ourselves? It is a display activity, showing off language learned, but there is no real communication here. We can, however, transform it very easily: if a learner describes a picture that the others cannot see and the listeners have a task, say of drawing a basic sketch of that picture, then there is real communication, and the 'describers' and 'artists' will interact with a specific purpose. This classroom activity effectively mirrors activities that learners might be involved in when using the language in the outside world, listening to a description of something over the phone, for instance.

Some common communicative activities

Here are examples of some popular general types of communicative activities you may wish to try out. Note that, in every case, we are primarily concerned with enabling and encouraging communication, rather than with controlled use of particular items of language or with accuracy.

Picture difference tasks

In pairs, one student is given picture A, one picture B. Without looking at the other picture, they have to find the differences (ie by describing the pictures to each other). See a complete example activity in Chapter 2, Section 4.

Group planning tasks

One example is 'planning a holiday'. Collect together a number of advertisements or brochures advertising a holiday. Explain to the students that they can all go on holiday together, but they must all agree on where they want to go. Divide the students into groups of three and give each group a selection of this material. Their task is to plan a holiday for the whole group (within a fixed budget per person). Allow them a good amount of time to read and select a holiday and then to prepare a presentation in which they attempt to persuade the rest of the class that they should choose this holiday. When they are ready, each group makes their presentation and the class discusses and chooses a holiday.

Another example is 'Survival', which uses the *Lost in the forest* resource from the DVD. Tell students a story, make it dramatic (invent the details) and include a disaster of some kind, eg minibus crashes miles from anywhere, injuries, etc. Give them the map and the notes. Students must plan what they should do to have the best chance of survival.

Ranking tasks

Prepare a list of items that learners can discuss and place in a particular order according to their opinions.

- What's the most useful invention?
- What's the best improvement that could be made to our town?
- What are the worst programmes on TV?
- Who's the most important person of the last 100 years?
- What are the qualities of a good language course?

Pyramid discussion

A 'pyramid discussion' is an organisational technique that works particularly well with simple problem-based discussions and especially with item-selection tasks, eg 'What are the four most useful things to have with you if you are shipwrecked on a desert island?', or list sequencing tasks, eg 'Put these items in order of importance'. Here's how to do it:

1 Introduce the problem, probably using a list on the board or on handouts.
2 Start with individual reflection – learners each decide what they think might be a solution.
3 Combine individuals to make pairs, who now discuss and come to an agreement or compromise. If you demand that there must be an agreed compromise solution before you move on to the next stage, it will significantly help to focus the task.

4 Combine the pairs to make fours; again, they need to reach an agreement.
5 Join each four with another four or – in a smaller class – with all the others.
6 When the whole class comes together, see if you can reach one class solution.

What's the point of doing a discussion in this way? (After all, it will take some time to do.) Well, most importantly, the technique gives students time to practise speaking in smaller groups before facing the whole class. Even the weaker speakers tend to find their confidence grows as the activity proceeds and they are able to rehearse and repeat arguments that they have already tested on others. Learners who would usually never dare state their views in front of the entire class will still get a number of chances to speak, and because they have practised a little, may even get up the courage to say them again to everyone. It also tends to lead to a much more exciting and well argued whole-class discussion. The smaller groups are seedbeds for a variety of ideas and opinions; if we jumped in the deep end with the whole-class stage, we would probably get silence or possibly just one or two students dominating.

See *Pyramid discussion* teaching technique on the DVD

Board games

Many commercially available board games lead to interesting speaking activities, though you do need to check them out and ensure that they represent 'good value' in terms of how much useful language they generate. It's also quite easy to create new board games specially designed for your class and their interests. I find it very useful to have one blank board game template (there's one in the *Small-group discussion* resource on the DVD). It is then relatively quick to write in a number of interesting questions or statements in each square round the board. Learners play the game in groups, moving their pieces and either giving a monologue or discussing squares they land on.

Puzzles and problems

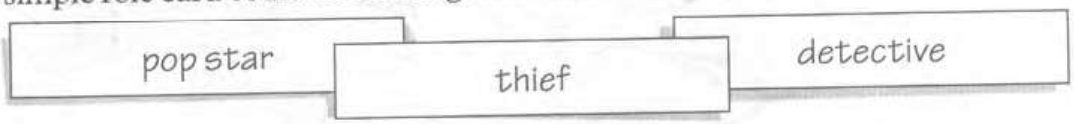
There are many published books nowadays filled with logic puzzles and problems. Many of these make interesting discussion tasks, maybe following a structure of (a) letting learners spend a little time individually considering the problem, then (b) bringing students together in a group to try and solve the puzzle together. Alternatively, some puzzles work well with the same stage (a), but then for the second stage having a full class 'mingle' (all learners walking around, meeting and talking), during which learners can compare their solutions with others.

3 Role play, real play and simulation

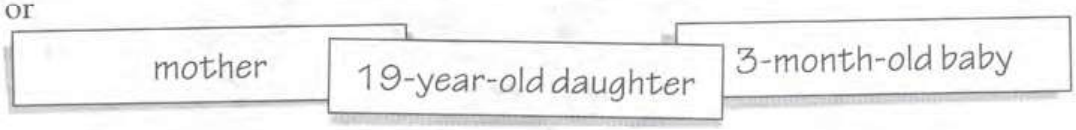
Role play

In role play, learners are usually given some information about a 'role' (eg a person or a job title). These are often printed on 'role cards'. Learners take a little preparation time and then meet up with other students to act out small scenes using their own ideas, as well as any ideas and information from the role cards.

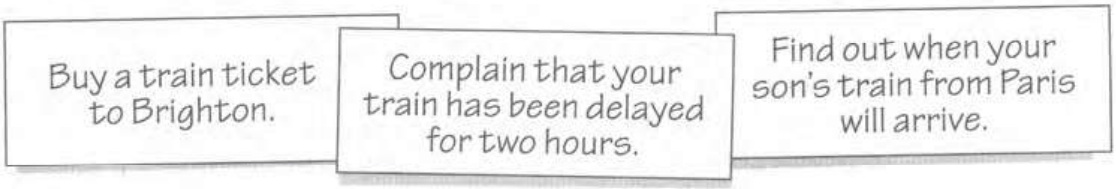
A simple role card could do nothing more than name the role,



or



or they could offer guidance as to what to do rather than the role itself,

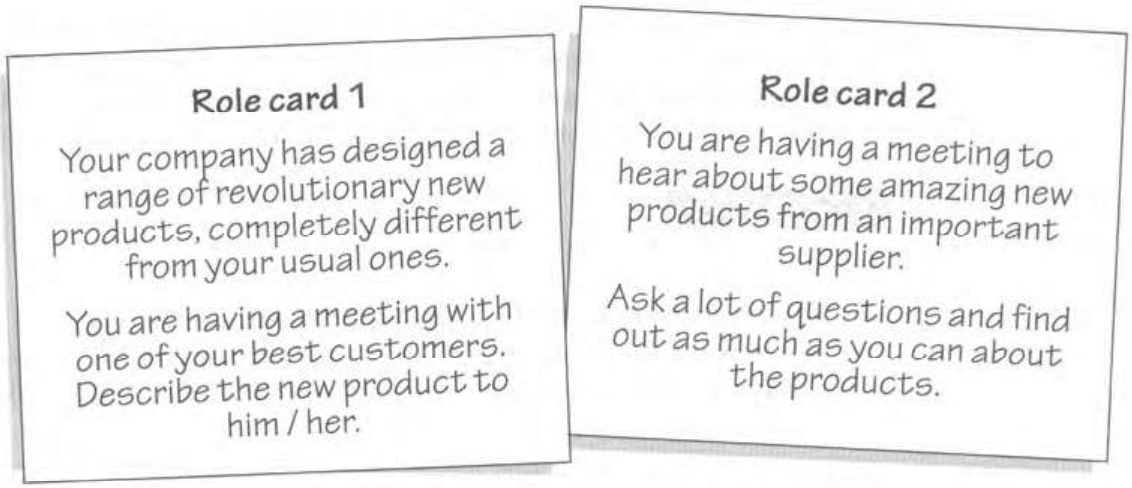

Buy a train ticket to Brighton.
Complain that your train has been delayed for two hours.
Find out when your son's train from Paris will arrive.

Role cards often contain some of the following information:

Background information about the role (name, job, sex, age, personal appearance, character, interests) as well as points relevant to the task (pieces of information you know (that maybe others don't), your opinions about the issue / problem / situation / people, what you want to happen, be decided, etc and items of language you may need).

A good set of role cards is often designed so that the participants will have distinctly different points of view and natural disagreements. They can lead to excellent discussions – and arguments – without anyone having to feel bad at the end because they got angry.

Role cards can be designed to offer students opportunities to practise specific pieces of language (maybe grammatical points, functional areas, lexical groups, etc). They can allow shyer students to challenge or disagree with other students with much less risk of offending them. The following set of cards is designed to give pairs of in-company business students a chance to practise using modifiers with adjectives (eg *quite big, rather fast, extremely intelligent*). Students will certainly need a good amount of time to prepare both ideas and language before tackling a role play such as this. (As role card 1 requires more preparation time, you could ask both students in a pair to prepare role card 1, then do the role play twice, swapping roles after the first, so both students can take both roles.)


Role card 1
Your company has designed a range of revolutionary new products, completely different from your usual ones.
You are having a meeting with one of your best customers. Describe the new product to him / her.
Role card 2
You are having a meeting to hear about some amazing new products from an important supplier.
Ask a lot of questions and find out as much as you can about the products.

As well as initiating general discussion on issues, role plays can also be set in specific contexts, providing a starting point for speaking practice and also for practice of specific language items.

Task 9.8 Writing role cards

Here are three role cards that very briefly set out particular viewpoints in order to encourage a small group discussion on vegetarianism and meat-eating. The fourth and fifth cards are missing. Write them.

1 You believe that meat-eating is natural for humans and that vegetarians are missing out on an important part of their diet.
2 You have been vegetarian for six years because you believe it is healthier.
3 You like the taste of meat, but don't eat it for moral reasons, as you feel it is wrong to kill animals.

Commentary

There are many possibilities. The extra cards could represent a vegan, a religious viewpoint, a scientific view, a 'they're all crazy' view, a chef, a butcher, etc.

Role play also gives you the possibility of introducing some more bizarre or interesting variations to a discussion, eg 'You are a chicken. You feel very strongly that you are being exploited by the meat industry.' In a role play about pollution, you might have a card saying 'You are the planet Earth. You don't think people are listening to you.'

Task 9.9 Adding a missing role card

Same task again. Here are some role cards. What do you think the missing card might have on it?

1 You are a store detective. You can see a suspicious-looking person at a clothes rail who appears to be putting something into her bag. Go over and firmly but politely ask her to come to the office.
2 You bought a sweater from this shop yesterday, but you have brought it back because it is too small. You want to go to the assistant to return it and get your money back, but before you do, you start looking at the other sweaters on the rail and comparing them with the one you got yesterday, which is in your bag.

3 You are a shop assistant. You have just noticed a customer coming in who was very rude to you yesterday. She wanted to buy a sweater, which you told her was the wrong size, but she insisted was right. Finally, she bought the sweater and stormed out of the shop. You hope she isn't going to cause more trouble.

Commentary

Possibly:

4 You are the manager of a large department store. The police have just phoned you to warn that a number of shoplifters are operating in this street. You decide to have a walk around your store and warn the assistants and the store detective to keep their eyes open.

This role play provides scope for use of functional language (apologising, refusing, disagreeing, denying, etc) as well as practising 'shop' vocabulary in a useful and interesting way. The potential for dramatic conflict is built into the cards, though the participants could, if they wished, avoid this completely.

Running a role play: some guidelines

- Make sure the students understand the idea of role play. Do they know what's going to happen? Do they know what is required of them? Are they comfortable doing that or not?
- Make sure the context or situation is clear.
- Do they understand the information on their own card? Allow reading / dictionary / thinking time (during which you go round and help if necessary).
- Give them time to prepare their ideas before they start – maybe encourage note-making – but when the activity starts, encourage them to improvise rather than rely on prepared speeches and notes. The preparation work they have done will inform their role play, but could simply get in the way if they over-rely on it. It may help to take away the cards when the role play starts.
- At the end of the role play, make sure that you give some feedback on how well (or not) the students completed the activity. Remember to comment on the language used as well as the appropriacy of what was said. Students will need to feel that they have achieved something.

Real play

A powerful variation on role play is **real play**. In this case, situations and one or more of the characters are drawn not from cards, but from a participant's own life and world. Typically, one of the learners plays himself / herself, but in a context other than the classroom. This person explains a context (eg from his / her work life) to other learners, and then together they recreate the situation in class. The real play technique allows learners to practise language they need in their own life. It is particularly useful for business and professional people.

For example, in a Business English class, a receptionist at a company said that she found it difficult to deal with foreign visitors who wanted to ask a question rather than just be directed to a person's office. She described a recent time when this had happened and then real played this with another student (who played her, while she played the part of the visitor). She found it helpful to watch her colleague playing her own role, as he did some things quite differently from her and used some interesting expressions. The teacher was also able to suggest some

ideas and language. Then they repeated the real play (with her playing herself). She said afterwards that she felt a little more confident about such situations.

Rather than a set of role cards, the most useful tool for real play is a blank framework – in effect, a card that allows learners to create their own real play role card. In class, I start by asking learners to choose a problem or situation that they might want to work on, and then guide them how to fill in their cards. Some frameworks will need to be worked on individually, some (if they are mutually dependent) in pairs or groups.

The following framework is for a two-person real play (A and B). Each learner needs one framework card. They start by agreeing which person's situation they will work with first (eg A's), and then A (the initiator) will explain a work situation to B. Both will fill in their own framework role card as appropriate.

Real play: work situations involving two people	
Who are the two people?	
Where are you?	
What are you talking about?	
Why are you talking?	
What happened just before this?	
Is any other information important?	
What are some points that will come up in the discussion?	
What would be a good result?	

When they are prepared, learners improvise a conversation as if it was a normal role play, quite possibly with someone else playing the role of the initiator (rather than playing it herself). When it's finished, it may then be useful for the initiator to give feedback on how the characters and events seemed, to 'fine-tune' it (eg 'My mother used to speak much louder than that'), in preparation for a second go at doing the role play, possibly – and revealingly – with swapped roles. You can also provide helpful feedback and language help, perhaps suggesting some typical phrases that might be used. After the second role play, it may be useful to review the task using a form like this:

Real play: review
Was the discussion like the real thing?
What were some interesting things that happened / that you said?
What have you learned from this? Will the task help you in real life?

Simulation

Simulation is really a large-scale role play. Role cards are normally used, but there is often quite a lot of other printed and recorded background information as well – newspaper articles, graphs, memos, news flashes, etc – which may come at the start of the simulation or appear while the simulation is unfolding, causing all participants to take note of the new data and possibly readjust their positions. The intention is to create a much more complete, complex 'world', say, of a business company, television studio, government body, etc.

This is a brief description of an example simulation:

The participants are all members of a UFO-spotters society at their annual meeting. They are deciding how they could better publicise their cause to the public. At the start, they have some facts about UFO incidents and some government statements (collected from magazines and the Internet). At an appropriate point in the simulation (probably about one-third of the way through), you introduce a news flash that a UFO has landed in Siberia. This obviously changes the direction of the meeting! Later interventions include a request to interview members of the society and, at the end, news that the UFO was another fake.

4 Fluency, accuracy and communication

Imagine a switch inside your head – it swings between two settings: 'working mainly on accuracy' and 'working mainly on fluency' (see Figure 9.1).

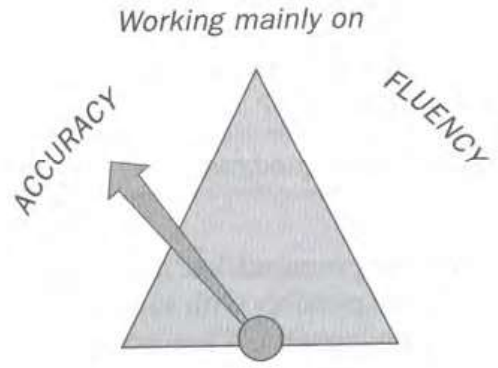


Figure 9.1 Accuracy / fluency switch

It's probably a huge simplification, but I suspect that something like this is at work in my head through most of my language teaching, changing its setting from activity to activity, stage to stage – and, in some teaching, changing moment by moment in response to things happening in class. And I think that initially getting that switch installed and working may be a key skill for anyone learning to be a language teacher.

Certainly there are activities in which you are arguably working on both accuracy and fluency in relatively equal measure, but many everyday language-teaching lesson stages are focused on one more than the other, and at any one moment, in any one activity, it is likely that you will be aiming to focus on accuracy rather than

fluency, or fluency rather than accuracy. The danger of correcting students in the middle of a mainly fluency task is that you interrupt their flow and take the focus off their message. Students often find it hard to continue after a correction, whilst others in class may become more reluctant to speak for fear of similar interruptions.

It is therefore important for you to be clear about what is involved in accuracy-focused work as compared with fluency-focused work. And it's especially important to be clear about the differing aims – and consequently different classroom procedures – of the two.

Task 9.10 Student views on speaking tasks

Here are some things you may hear your students say (or imagine them thinking!). Take sides. Rehearse your arguments and replies to some or all of the comments.

1 But I don't want to talk to other students. They speak badly. I just want to listen to you speak.
2 I speak a lot, but what is the point if you never correct me? I will never improve.
3 You should be teaching us – not just letting us talk. That's lazy teaching.
4 I don't need to speak. Teach me more grammar. I will speak later.
5 There's no point doing this task if we use bad English to do it.
6 This is just a game. I paid a lot of money and now I have to play a game.

Commentary

There are times in class when a focus on accuracy – and therefore a greater use of instant correction – may be appropriate.

There are other times when the focus is on fluency. At these times, instant correction may be less appropriate and could interfere with the aims of the activity.

You need to be clear about whether your main aim is accuracy or fluency, and adapt your role in class appropriately.

Having said all that, there may still be a kind of correction that fulfils the 'non-interfering' aim of fluency activities, yet offers substantial concrete help to the learner who is coming to terms with language items. We will look at this under the heading of 'scaffolding' a little later in this section.

Running a fluency activity

If the main aim is to get the students to speak, then one way to achieve that would be for you to reduce your own contributions. Probably the less you speak, the more space it will allow the students. It could be useful to aim to say nothing while the activity is underway, and save any contributions for before and after. In an activity mainly geared towards encouraging fluency, you are likely to monitor discreetly or vanish (see Chapter 3, Section 5).

The activity route map from Chapter 2, Section 2 (see Figure 9.2) works well for a fluency activity, and we can add a column for likely teacher involvement:

	Stage	Teacher involvement
1	Before the lesson: familiarise yourself with the material and activity	-
2	In class: lead-in / prepare for the activity	Teacher centre-stage
3	Set up the activity (or section of activity), ie give instructions, make groupings, etc	Teacher centre-stage
4	Run the activity (or section): students do the activity – maybe in pairs or small groups – while you monitor and help	Teacher out of sight, uninvolved
5	Close the activity (or section) and invite feedback from the students	Teacher centre-stage again
6	Post-activity: do any appropriate follow-on work	?

Figure 9.2 Activity route map

A useful thing for you to do during Stage 4 above is to take notes (unobtrusively) of interesting student utterances (correct and incorrect) for possible use later on (at the end of the activity, the next day, next week, etc).

Ideas for correction work after a fluency activity

- Write up a number of sentences used during the activity and discuss them with the students.
- Write a number of sentences on the board. Ask the students to come up to the board and correct the sentences.
- Invent and write out a story that includes a number of errors you overheard during the activity. Hand out the story the next day and the students, in pairs or as a whole group, find the errors and correct them.
- Write out two lists headed 'A' and 'B'. On each list, write the same ten sentences from the activity. On one list, write the sentence with an error; on the other, write the corrected version. Thus the correct version of sentence 3 might be on either list A or list B (the other list has the incorrect version). You divide the students into two groups, 'A' and 'B', and hand out the appropriate list to each group. The groups discuss their own list (without sight of the other list) and try to decide if their version of each sentence is correct or not. If it is wrong, they correct it. When they have discussed all the sentences, the groups can then compare the two sheets (and perhaps come to some new conclusions).

For more ideas on correction work, see Chapter 12, Section 1.

Scaffolding

I suggested earlier that, during a fluency activity, there may be a way to offer spontaneous correction that:

- does not interfere too much with the flow of conversation;
- offers useful language feedback;
- actually helps the speaker to construct his conversation.

'Scaffolding' refers to the way a competent language speaker helps a less competent one to communicate by both encouraging and providing possible elements of the conversation. It is the way a primary-school teacher might help a young child to communicate, or the way a chat-show host might draw out a guest. The listener offers support – like scaffolding round a building – to help the speaker create his own spoken structure.

Scaffolding in class isn't a normal conversation in the sense that the teacher / listener is not aiming to contribute any personal stories or opinions of her own; the aim of her own speaking is solely to help the speaker tell his story.

Here are some notes on techniques that might be appropriate:

Scaffolding techniques

- Showing interest and agreeing: nodding, 'uh-huh', eye contact, 'yes', etc;
- Concisely asking for clarification of unclear information, eg repeating an unclear word;
- Encouragement echo: repeating the last word (perhaps with questioning intonation) in order to encourage the speaker to continue;
- Echoing meaning: picking on a key element of meaning and saying it back to the speaker, eg 'a foreign holiday';
- Asking conversation-oiling questions (ones that mainly recap already stated information), eg *Is it? Do you? Where was it?* etc;
- Asking brief questions (or using sentence heads) that encourage the speaker to extend the story, eg *And then ... He went ... She wanted ...* etc;
- Unobtrusively saying the correct form of an incorrect word (but only if having the correct word makes a significant positive contribution to the communication);
- Giving the correct pronunciation of words in replies without drawing any particular attention to it;
- Unobtrusively giving a word or phrase that the speaker is looking for.

Task 9.11 Identifying scaffolding techniques

Which scaffolding techniques can you identify in this short transcript of a lesson at Elementary level, where a learner wants to tell his teacher about a TV story he saw concerning the rather unlikely sport of 'extreme ironing'?

STUDENT: *It is like sport ...*
TEACHER: *Uh-huh.*
STUDENT: *... but is with 'eye ron'.*
TEACHER: *With an iron?*
STUDENT: *Yes, is 'eye ron' sport. They ... er ...*

TEACHER: *What do they do?*
STUDENT: *Er, yes. It is like sport ex ... ex ...*
TEACHER: *An extreme sport?*
STUDENT: *Yes. They use 'eye rons' in extreme place.*
TEACHER: *Ha – irons in extreme places? Where?*
STUDENT: *Ah, like onto a mountain.*
TEACHER: *On a mountain!*
STUDENT: *Yes (laughs), on a mountain or river.*
TEACHER: *What do they do?*
STUDENT: *They iron and in tree on top.*
TEACHER; *At the top of trees?*
STUDENT: *Yes.*

5 Different kinds of speaking

How can we teach speaking? Is it enough to give learners communicative activities that require them to speak (trying out using grammar, phrases, vocabulary they already know, etc) or is it possible and necessary to teach specific skills? So far, we haven't really taken into account that there may be 'skills of speaking' that also need to be studied and practised.

In order to answer these questions, we need to consider what is involved in successful speaking, and particularly consider the nature of different 'genres'.

Task 9.12 Defining 'genre'

What does the word 'genre' mean? Why might 'genre' be an important consideration when teaching language?

Commentary

In everyday life, people speak in a variety of ways, depending on who they are with, where they are, the nature of the situation, etc. To take two extreme examples, giving a sermon in church is a very different kind of speaking from enquiring about car insurance over the phone. These are two different genres.

A genre is a variety of speech (or writing) that you would expect to find in a particular place, with particular people, in a particular context, to achieve a particular result, using a particular channel (eg face to face, by phone).

A genre is often characterised by specific choices about style, manner, tone, quantity, volume, directness, choice of words, formality, type of content, etc. Quite apart from the detailed content and specific words of the sermon or the phone call, there is likely to be a generally recognisable 'sermon-ness' about the sermon and a 'enquiry-on-the-phone-ness' about the call. That's not to say that we can't also knowingly choose to ignore or undermine the genre, eg by giving a sermon in the style of a comedy sketch (in fact, substituting one genre for another)!

Task 9.13 Varieties of speech genre

Make a list of about ten distinctly different real-life types of speaking, eg making a public speech.

Commentary

Some possible answers:

- Giving an academic lecture
- Telling a joke
- Greeting a passing colleague
- Making a phone enquiry
- Chatting with a friend
- Explaining medical problems to a doctor
- Giving military orders
- Negotiating a sale
- Giving street directions
- Making a business presentation
- Communicating 'live' during an Internet game
- Explaining a grammatical point

Being more specific about genre

A term such as 'making a public speech' is still relatively imprecise. It could refer to a wide variety of quite different kinds of task, from thanking some colleagues for a birthday present to standing up as best man at a wedding reception to presenting a one-hour talk at a conference of 3,000 people.

It is possible to specify types of speaking more precisely than by simply naming a genre if we add information about **why** the speaking is being done, **where** it is being done and **who** is listening or interacting with the speaker.

Task 9.14 Analysing a genre

Look at the list of common speaking genres. Choose one and analyse it using the grid in Figure 9.3.

a Meeting people at an informal party
b Discussing new sales at a business meeting
c Telling a joke in a café
d Leaving a phone message
e Buying a train ticket at the train station
f Asking for directions on the street
g Making a dentist's appointment on the phone
h Checking in at the airport

Two examples have been filled in to help you. NB You are not analysing all examples of each genre, just one specific one. For example, the lecture specified here may be very different if any of the variables were altered.

Genre What general kind of speaking is it?	**Purpose** Why is this speaking done?	**Setting** Where is it done?	**Audience** Who is listening?	**Response** Does the speaker get a spoken response from listener(s)? • one-way (no response)? • two-way (reciprocal communication)? • multiway? (more than two communicate)?
An academic lecture	*To inform people of facts about 17th-century British history*	*Lecture theatre at Budapest University*	*Room of students listening, note-taking, etc*	*Mainly one-way: response only in terms of posture, expression and possibly a question or comment*
A stand-up conversation at a formal party	*Making contacts; finding new clients*	*Living room of a private house in Nairobi*	*One or more other professional people of similar social status*	*Multiway: a varying number of people speak*

Figure 9.3 Genre-analysis grid

Why is genre important?

Imagine that you are nineteen years old and about to meet your girlfriend's / boyfriend's parents for the first time. I'm sure that a lot of words and phrases would be buzzing through your head as you try to select just the right thing to say. However, even before you make a decision as to the exact words to say, you probably first have to make a bigger decision as to the generally appropriate way of talking to them. Will you adopt a hip, street-talk style? A very formal, wordy greeting? Will you make a speech? Rap a spontaneous poem? Will you be informally polite and friendly? It's possible that you can make this decision subconsciously in a fraction of a second, but having made it, it colours everything else you decide to say when you open your mouth. It determines the choice of grammar, words, how much you talk, how polite

you are, how much you speak and how much you listen, etc. Of course, you can adjust your 'genre' as you take part in the conversation, but again your new choice will colour all you say, and generally it is unlikely that you'll decide to switch dramatically into a genre that you earlier rejected as entirely inappropriate.

From this example, it's apparent that choice of genre is a vital decision a speaker makes before she proceeds with almost any speaking act. A learner of a language needs to learn not just words, grammar, pronunciation, etc, but also about appropriate ways of speaking in different situations – which may be significantly different in the target language culture compared with their own. For this reason, offering a range of communicative 'fluency' activities to our learners is probably insufficient as a course in speaking. We must think about the range of speaking acts that a learner may be faced with and give them chances to practise selecting appropriate genres and planning the appropriate language needed for a variety of different speaking situations and audiences.

Successful speaking involves fluently communicating information or opinions in a clear unambiguous manner in an appropriate way for a particular context.

Task 9.15 Factors involved in speech acts

If your learners had to take part in the speech acts in Task 9.14 above, what sort of things might prove difficult for them? The table in Figure 9.4 lists some of the skills and strategies that competent language users might employ when speaking.

Choose three of the genres from Task 9.14. For each one, select four or five items from Figure 9.4 that seem to be most important for successfully establishing and maintaining communication. For example, if I consider (a) Meeting people at an informal party, I might decide that the following were most important (and tick them in the table):

- Being aware of appropriate topics and style for the context (eg business meeting, social chit-chat)
- Speaking spontaneously with limited / no preparation time before speaking
- Coping with unpredictable responses
- Showing interest in the person speaking

These are only possible answers. Different people might select other items.

	a			
Pronunciation				
Speaking clearly, with comprehensible sounds				
Using fluent, connected speech with appropriate word-linking				
Using stress and intonation to emphasise or draw attention to things, express emotion or attitude, etc				
Using an appropriate pace				
Context				
Choosing and maintaining a suitable level of formality / informality				
Choosing and maintaining a suitable level of politeness				
Being aware of appropriate topics and style for the context (ie business meeting, social chit-chat)	✓			
Coping with a stressful speaking context (eg other people waiting, limited time to speak)				
Speaking spontaneously with limited / no preparation time before speaking	✓			
Coping with uncertainty about the language level of other people				
Organising information				
Structuring speech as you talk				
Giving neither too much nor too little information				
Not offering irrelevant information				
Conveying clear, accurate information				
Clearly sign-posting to your listener(s) the structure and stages of what you say				
Interaction				
Establishing a relationship before and during communication				
Coping with unpredictable responses	✓			
Turn-taking				
Listening				
Listening and responding appropriately in line with the progress of a conversation				
Showing interest in the person speaking				
Reaching a negotiated / compromise conclusion	✓			
Coping with a variety of content (facts, opinions, arguments, anecdotes, etc) simultaneously				
Speaking strategies				
Holding the floor when you want to continue speaking				
Interrupting politely				
Starting new topics or changing topics				
Language items				
Fluently forming accurate structures to express required meaning				
Knowing fixed phrases used in specific situations				
Creating effective questions				
Having sufficient lexical resources to express meanings				

Figure 9.4 Grid for assessing speech acts

How can you organise a speaking lesson based around this idea of helping learners to work better within a given genre? Broadly speaking, you have two options:

1 You can work on the individual micro-skills (eg things such as those in the table in Figure 9.4) using games and practice activities;
2 You can work on a bigger scale, getting learners to deploy a range of these micro-skills while completing a genre-based task.

Task 9.16 Practising micro-skills

Take the micro-skill of 'interrupting politely' (in an informal social conversation). Can you think of a game or practice activity that might raise students' awareness of this or help them improve their skills in this area?

Commentary

Here are two sample games and activities:

1 Learners work in small groups. Each person takes a card with a topic word on it (eg 'swimming'). One person in each group must start speaking on their given topic. Others attempt to interrupt and change the topic politely to their topic, while all work to maintain a balanced 'café' conversation.
2 Hand out a list of expressions for interrupting politely (eg *By the way* ...), but including some unlikely or incorrect ones (eg *Now I want us to talk about* ...). Learners select the correct items from the list (and then have a conversation using them).

Task 9.17 Stages in a speaking lesson

You have decided to work on 'making a business appointment over the phone' (or another similar speaking task). One important stage of the lesson will be when learners try doing the speaking itself (simulating it in pairs, probably, rather than making real phone calls!). What other stages do you think there might be in the lesson?

Commentary

The following are some likely elements:

Once you have explained the specific speaking task, the learners may need to:

- plan how they will do the task;
- rehearse parts (or all) of it;
- hear examples of competent speakers doing the same task;
- get input from you on possible structures, phrases, vocabulary, etc;
- reflect on how well they did the task after they finish;
- replan or revise their original ideas;
- have another go at doing the task a second (third?) time.

At various points, the learners may want correction and advice on how to do it better.

Here are those elements arranged into a basic lesson sequence, together with a worked example for 'making a business appointment over the phone'. The stage marked with a star could come at any point of your choosing.

Basic lesson sequence

1 Set task
2 Plan the speaking
3 Rehearse the speaking
4 Do the task
5 Feedback / Review the success
6 Add / Correct / Revise
7 Redo the task
* Exposure to example

Worked example

1 **Set task:** Tell learners that they must phone a business contact to make an appointment for a meeting to discuss future plans.
2 **Plan the speaking:** Ask learners to work in pairs to decide what the caller will say and how the receptionist will respond. Learners should not write out a whole script, but can make notes of particular phrases.
3 **Rehearse the speaking:** Learners practise in pairs. You listen in and suggest corrections and improvements.
4 **Do the task:** Make new pairs. Without further discussion, learners 'phone' each other and do the task.
5 **Feedback / review:** The pairs meet and reflect on whether the task was done well. Maybe the whole class also discusses the question and you offer notes. You may draw attention to specific language that learners could use and specific ways of interacting appropriate to the genre.
* **Exposure to example:** Play a recording of competent speakers doing the same task. The class is asked to take down notes about language they use.
6 **Add / correct / revise:** The pairs work out how they could improve their task next time.
7 **Redo the task:** Make new pairs. The task is done again.

6 Approaches to writing

Task 9.18 Writing in real life and in the classroom

List some things you have written in the past two weeks. What are the implications of your list for the English-language classroom?

Commentary

The role of writing in everyday life has changed quite dramatically over recent decades. When selecting work for students, you need to be clear about whether it is useful practice.

Whereas, in the early 1990s, many people wrote very little day by day, the advent and popularity of email, web forums, Internet messenger services and text messaging has meant that there is now a huge increase in written communication. Whether this growth and popularity will continue as new technology offers easier, cheaper and faster video and voice connections is not clear.

This new kind of communication has its own peculiar rules and rituals, and in some cases has evolved its own shorthand, abbreviations and lexis, often because of the perceived need to write quickly or within a limited word or character count.

You can buy little dictionaries of text-message conventions and abbreviations. There are also new ways of expressing oneself. I can now communicate instantly across the world and use a little picture of a cartoon face to express my reaction to something written by my friend. Is that writing?

Beyond these new ways of communicating, many people actually do very little writing in day-to-day life, and a great deal of what they do write is quite short: brief notes to friends or colleagues, answers on question forms, diary entries, postcards, etc. The need for longer, formal written work seems to have lessened over the years, and this is reflected in many classrooms where writing activities are perhaps less often found than those for other skills.

Writing in the classroom

Despite the points raised above, there may still be good reasons why it is useful to include work on writing in a course:

- Many students have specific needs that require them to work on writing skills: academic study, examination preparation and Business English are three common areas where written work is still very important.
- At the most basic level, your students are likely to be involved in taking down notes in lessons such as yours; this is a skill that is worth focusing on.
- Writing involves a different kind of mental process. There is more time to think, to reflect, to prepare, to rehearse, to make mistakes and to find alternative and better solutions.
- It can give you a break, quieten down a noisy class, change the mood and pace of a lesson, etc.

Much writing work in the classroom falls on a continuum of how much restriction, help and control is offered, from copying to unguided writing.

1	**Copying**	Students practise forming letter shapes in a handwriting book, note down substitution tables from the board, copy examples from a textbook, etc.
2	**Doing exercises**	Students write single words phrases, sentences, etc in response to very tightly focused tasks with limited options and limited opportunities for creativity or getting things wrong.
3	**Guided writing**	You guide students to write longer texts in quite restricted or controlled tasks by offering samples, models, possibly useful language items, advice, organisational frameworks, etc.
4	**Process writing**	Students write what they want to, with help, encouragement and feedback from you and others throughout the process of choosing a topic, gathering ideas, organising thoughts, drafting, etc.
5	**Unguided writing**	Students write freely without overt guidance, assistance or feedback during the writing process, though a title or task may be set, and work may be 'marked' later.

Accuracy tends to be more of a concern towards the top of the scale, fluency increasingly important towards the lower part. 'Copying' and 'doing exercises' are making use of writing in order to help students learn something else, (eg grammar), but do not significantly help students become better 'writers'.

Teaching the skill of writing

Is it possible to teach the 'skill of writing'? How could we do it? For many teachers, the answer seems to be mainly by setting a writing task, leaving the students to do it (perhaps as homework) then collecting it in and marking it. Notice the gap in this diagram between setting and collecting. That is where the difficult writing work happens – yet it is often done entirely at home with the teacher doing nothing to help the student improve.

Some teachers doubt if there is any useful in-class work that could be done on writing, believing that it is essentially an individual activity. However, there are many possible steps that could go into the middle area of the diagram in Figure 9.5. A student can learn to become a better writer by (a) being actively encouraged and helped to follow through a series of preparatory steps before the final text is produced, and (b) becoming more aware of that preparation process, so that it can be done more independently and transparently in future. For example, we could help learners:

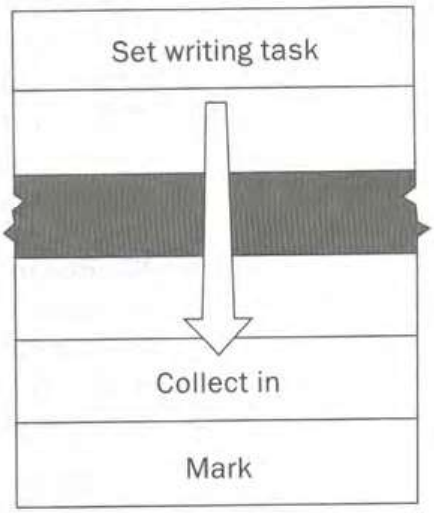


Figure 9.5 Setting a writing task

- choose a topic;
- choose a genre;
- get ideas;
- discuss ideas with others to get new perspectives;
- select between ideas;
- sequence ideas;
- make notes, diagrams, etc to help organise ideas;
- find grammar and lexis suitable for the text;
- do practice exercises on language items that will be useful;
- study sample and model texts similar to what they want to write;
- plan the organisation of their text;
- draft a rough text;
- get feedback on content;
- get feedback on language use;
- co-write sections of text in groups;
- make alterations and rewrites;
- write a final version;
- find appropriate readers.

Activities designed to work in these areas in class come under the headings of 'guided writing' or 'process writing' work (which in practice tend to overlap quite a lot).

Planning classroom writing work

A typical route for classroom work on helping students to write (where the teacher has already selected the topic or title) might involve some or all of the following steps:

1	**Introduce the topic**	Get students interested, maybe by reading a text (article, letter, advert, etc) showing pictures, discussing some key issues, etc.
2	**Introduce and summarise the main writing task**	Make sure students are clear what they have to do. They need to know the genre (magazine article? letter? formal report? etc), who they are writing for and why. Avoid bland, 'genre-free text for no particular audience' writing tasks.
3	**Brainstorm ideas**	Whole class: use the board to collect as many ideas as possible. Small groups: speak and take notes.
4	**Fast-write**	A very good way to overcome 'blank page' terror and get ideas flowing is to 'fast-write' (see Section 7).
5	**Select and reject ideas**	What's worth leaving out?
6	**Sort and order ideas**	Start to plan structure of text by arranging ideas.
7	**Decide on specific requirements: style, information, layout, etc**	How is the text to be laid out, paragraphed, organised? Are there any special rules (eg if it's a letter, report, etc)? Are there things that must be included or stated in a certain way?
8	**Focus on useful models**	Help students to study sample(s) of written texts similar to the one they are writing. Focus on content, message, organisation, grammar, phrases, etc.
9	**Plan the text**	Use notes, sketches or cut-up cards to start organising a possible shape for the text.
10	**Get feedback**	At various points, you, other students or groups can read and make helpful comments / suggestions about a text. This help may be on the content and message, the organisation, the language, etc.
11	**Prepare draft(s)**	Students often benefit from preparing a draft version before the final one. This gives them the chance to get reader reactions and corrections.
12	**Edit**	Students carefully go through their own text, checking if it says what they want it to, if it reads clearly and smoothly, if its language is correct, etc.
13	**Prepare final text**	Based on feedback, students write a finished text.
14	**Readers!**	Rather than simply 'mark' a text, get other students to respond to it in some more realistic ways.

In many cases, the tasks we set our students will determine the kinds of activities and lesson stages that are appropriate. When selecting writing tasks, remember that the old school 'write a story about ...' represents only a very small (or non-existent) part of a normal person's writing. While 'creative writing' is often a great activity, we need to make sure that learners mainly get practice in the range of real-life writing tasks that they will face. As far as possible, select the tasks most relevant for their needs. Here are some general ideas for real-world writing tasks. You may be able to use these to help you generate more focused ideas of your own that are relevant to your learners.

Write real letters / emails	Think of real people to whom students can write, eg Members of Parliament, manufacturing companies, fan clubs, local newspapers, other schools, etc. Send them. Get replies. Write back.
Write your own newsletter, magazine, blog, etc	Class magazine, school magazine, fan newsletter, local news, campaigning on environmental or political issues, etc.
Advertise (ideas, school events, products, etc)	Advertise around the school, around town; send in your ads to local papers.
Send comments, replies to discussions, reviews, etc to websites	There are now a wide number of discussions, message boards and newsgroups specifically for students or for special-interest groups. Many shop and consumer sites invite reader reviews of books, products, events, etc.
Write questionnaires and then use them out in the street	These can be written in English or in the learners' own language. Write up the results. Publish them!
Long-term projects	These are a good way of integrating writing with other work. The aim could be a file or book at the end (see Chapter 15, Section 11).
Apply for things, fill in forms register for things, etc	This can be done directly online if students have Internet access or printed out on paper.

Here are some examples of a few specific tasks:

- Write a guidebook entry about your part of town.
- Write feedback and evaluation of a new product.
- Fill in a car-hire booking form.
- Write a review of a new game on a computer forum message board.
- Write a postcard to a manufacturer requesting an information leaflet about their work.
- Write (and design) computer presentation slides.
- Write an academic essay summarising arguments for and against a viewpoint.
- Write your personal profile for inclusion in a class souvenir booklet.
- Write a poem about your strongest childhood memory.
- Write a letter in reply to a job application to arrange an interview.

7 Writing in class

In this section, we will look in more detail at some classroom activities and strategies mentioned in the previous section.

Ideas for generating ideas

Brainstorming

It can be hard to get enough good ideas to write about. Brainstorming is a way to get the 'ideas creation engine' running. It means 'opening your mind and letting ideas pour out'. It also means not engaging that 'checking' part of your brain that too quickly dismisses things as stupid or useless (because we lose out on a lot of potentially good ideas because we reject them too soon). For this reason, it seems helpful to separate the ideas collection and the (later) critical review of those ideas.

Here's a way to brainstorm in class:

- Write the topic or title in a circle in the middle of the board.
- Tell students to call out anything that comes to mind connected with the topic.
- Write up everything on the board.
- There should be no discussion or comments (especially derogatory ones!) – just ideas.

So what will happen? People will call out ideas. You'll write them up. It may take a while to get going, but after a bit, the ideas will probably start flowing. After a reasonable period of time (ie however long it takes to fill the board with thoughts), you can stop. Now there is a lot to look back over. Invite students to select ideas they like and can use, or maybe allow some discussion time in groups to continue the sifting process. Everyone should have something they can make use of.

Text-starts

A lot of real-life writing involves looking at other texts and summarising, reporting, responding to them, selecting ideas from them, commenting on them, etc. Supplying 'text-starts' can be a good way to provide useful writing work for students and practise reading / writing skills that are useful in professional life and academic research. The actual content of the texts provides a lot of 'support' for the writer (especially the one who worries that she must be 'imaginative' to write) in that there is something concrete to deal with and many ideas are already formulated and mainly need a response or opinion, rather than original thought.

Resource material	Writing task
Information about a holiday location (pictures, description, list of attractions, etc).	You are the copy-writer for the local tourist board. Write a two-paragraph advertisement for the place to encourage more visitors to come.
Full data and illustrations of three different up-to-date household products or gadgets. Possible extra information about consumer trends, the economy, etc.	You are a senior manager and will attend a meeting to decide on one new product to produce. Write a brief report on each product, then outline your recommendations as to which one to choose, with reasons.
A map of a town. Short descriptions of 'ghosts' that are said to haunt specific buildings and locations.	You are a local tour guide who has decided to start a 'Ghost walk' for tourists around town. Plan a route for the walk. Write a short article for the local paper to publicise it.
Seven emails to your company pointing out problems with the delivery service.	You are head of the delivery department. Write an email to the director summarising the problems and making recommendations.
A number of articles from different sources on the same news item; a letter from your friend asking if you've heard about the item and what you think about it.	Write a letter to your friend.
History articles, encyclopaedias, websites, etc.	Prepare a wall poster to interest and inform your friends about a historical topic.

Fast-writing

For many writers, the single most difficult thing is simply to start writing. The blank page sits in front of you, and it can become very hard even to put down the first word. The longer you fail to write, the harder that first sentence becomes.

Instead, imagine that your students could have a whole page of their own writing to start from; not a final version, but something on which to base their new writing. This is what fast-writing aims to achieve. Even if only a word or a line from this first attempt makes it into the final text, it has served its purpose, like the ignition key on a car, getting the writing started.

Tell students that they need a few pieces of blank paper. The rules are that when you say 'start', they should:

- start writing about the topic;
- not stop writing;
- not put their pen down at all;
- not worry about spelling, grammar, etc;
- write 'um, um, um' or 'rubbish' or something else if they can't think of what to write;
- not stop to go back and read what they have written;
- keep writing till you say 'stop' (which will be after five / eight / ten minutes or however long you think is appropriate for your group).

At the end, they will have a page or more of writing. A lot of it will be rubbish! But there will also often be ideas and ways of saying things that are worth retrieving. Give the learners enough time to look back over what they have written. Tell them to be ruthless and cross out a lot of the writing, but also to retrieve some good pieces. They can then use these as starting points for the new writing.

It's a surprisingly useful task. Often we don't know what on earth we are going to write until we start writing it. Fast-writing is one way to start that finding-out process.

Ideas for helping writing

Structuring and organising

Some simple strategies may help learners find an order for their ideas. 'Card planning' involves learners writing down the main themes of their text as notes onto separate cards. They then arrange the cards in various orders until they get a sequence that seems to work. Similarly, learners could draw a sketch diagram showing how their text will be put together, using lines and arrows to link separate items.

Looking at sample texts

It is often helpful if students see samples of the kind of texts they are working on. If you offer this as an activity early on in the lesson sequence, it is likely that this sample will be viewed as a kind of model on which to base their own work. The final product may then be substantially similar to the original, especially in layout and organisation, but with substitutions of content. If you offer samples later on in the writing work, learners will probably see the text as something to give them extra support and ideas, but may not significantly alter their own overall structure and content.

What can you study in a sample text?

- The layout
- The overall message
- How the items are organised
- Specific phrases and sentences used
- Distinctive grammatical features
- The style and tone
- The effect on the reader

Getting feedback on drafts

Feedback on writing isn't something to save up until the entire text is fully completed. In fact, it is of very little use then, as the thing is over, and students will probably just want a complimentary comment and then to forget it. The most useful comments are those that will have an impact as the writing is evolving; these will be useful from as many different readers as possible, from fellow students just as much as from you.

Organise pairs of students to read each other's work, or groups to give comments. Feedback could be done in answer to specific questions or according to a feedback form of some kind or more freely as general response and comments. As a result of feedback, students can write a new draft of their work, which can then be submitted again to readers for comments. This cycle of feedback and comments can lead to excellent results and really helps writers get a clearer idea of what a reader finds in their work.

Using computers

If you like the idea of redrafting and feedback, you may want to give thought to whether the writing is on computer. Using a computer has significant advantages for student writing over pen and paper:

- It is readable (no handwriting jungles)!
- Multiple copies can be printed out for as many readers as needed.
- Suggestions and edits can be written on to hard copies and then editing can be done on the computer – no need to rewrite from scratch.
- It can be emailed directly to other students or to you.

Some specific features of word-processing software may be useful. If your students are relatively unfamiliar with computers, you may want to teach them how to:

- select text; change font and font size; apply underline, bold, italic, etc;
- use basic editing features 'cut', 'copy', 'paste';
- set the spell-check language and options for 'check spelling as you type';
- regularly save back-up copies so that six hours of vital work is not lost after one mistake;
- use (and be wary of) any grammar-checking facilities;
- use a 'comment' feature, allowing different readers to leave notes in the body of the text that the writer can then review and use later on;
- program simple **macros** (mini-programs that can do frequently repeated actions at the press of a button). For example, I have found that having a word-count macro is very handy on the main toolbar.

8 Responses to writing

Task 9.19 **Successful writing**

In real life, when we write something, how can we measure if the writing was a success?

Commentary

Well, it's certainly quite rare for us to hand it to someone else, wait a few days and then get it back with a short comment and / or a mark written at the bottom. Yet this is a fairly common response in classroom situations. Such marking may sometimes be helpful or required, but often isn't the most useful way to help our learners become better writers.

Audience and purpose

In real life, we can judge if our writing was successful by whether it did what we wanted it to do. For example:

- if we wrote a complaint email to an Internet bookshop, we would feel successful if they replied, seemed to understand our problem and took steps to deal with it;
- if we wrote a story about a happy incident in our childhood, we might feel we had succeeded if other people read it and enjoyed it, and perhaps wanted to talk to us about it and ask questions or respond with their own stories;
- if we wrote a report about sales prospects in Slovakia for a board meeting, we might feel that we had achieved our goal if other people at the meeting found the information clear, succinct and complete and were able to make use of it in the discussion.

The fact that writing can achieve such things is part of what motivates us to put care into our writing. And in cases where we are not able to get such immediate, direct, tangible feedback, we may need to be particularly careful in rereading and editing a text before we send it away to a reader. This 'delayed response' nature of much writing can be part of what makes it hard to do. Good writers need to become careful readers of – and reflectors on – their own work. The existence of audience and purpose are worth bearing in mind in class.

Setting relevant writing tasks

Rather too many classroom writing tasks are directionless and audienceless. If students are only writing 'to please the teacher', there is probably relatively low motivation, and the quality of writing may be compromised, as students will have

no clear perception as to why the work is being done. So how can we provide audience and purpose? Here are some key strategies:

- If you have done a Needs Analysis with your students, base writing work on stated needs, ie using task types, contexts and situations directly relevant to students.
- Even before students start writing, think carefully about what will happen with the finished piece of text. If students know who will read their text and what that reader may need or expect from it, then they have a clear idea of the purpose of the writing, which will strongly affect many other decisions they take in the writing.
- Make sure you do not mark and give feedback only on accuracy of language. Include attention to the question of whether the writing is **appropriate** for the task type and is well targeted at the probable reader.
- Even if you feel that you have relatively little idea of your class's needs (for example, if your class is studying on a short general English course), you can still select writing tasks that are likely to reflect things that many students may need to write in real life.

Task 9.20 Reflecting real-life writing purposes in the classroom

Think up some ideas for real-life writing purposes that could be reflected and recreated in classroom writing activities, eg

Real-life purpose: you want to persuade someone to change their mind and come to your party.

Possible classroom task: you write a letter.

Commentary

Here are a few more:

Real-life purpose	Possible classroom task
You want to sell your second-hand bike.	You write a noticeboard ad or newspaper small ad.
You want people to vote for you in the class election.	You design and write a poster or election leaflet.
You want to inform a colleague who phoned and when.	You write a memo.
You want to book a suitable hotel for a visit to Vienna.	You fill in an Internet booking form.
You want to make people laugh.	You write three jokes in the class magazine.

Marking

If you are required (or wish) to provide some more traditional marking / feedback on written work, what are the options?

Task 9.21 Alternatives to traditional 'marking'

Your students have done some written work. You now collect in the papers, underline every mistake in red pen and write a mark or grade at the end. That's one option, but why may it not always be a good idea? What alternative options can you think of?

Commentary

Getting back a piece of work with a teacher's comments and corrections on it can be helpful. It can also be discouraging, especially if there is too much information, if the information is inappropriate or hard to interpret, or if the general tone is negative rather than positive. The red pen particularly has associations for many people with insensitive and discouraging correction and judgement. Some alternatives are listed below.

Variations on traditional teacher marking

Earlier in this chapter, we looked at options for getting students to look at each other's work – and they could even 'mark' it. However, many learners will expect the teacher to look at their work and may feel let down if it is only evaluated by other students. Here are some other options available to you:

- Use a green or a blue pen!
- Discuss the marking criteria with students. Agree on a mark or grade.
- Write the correct answers in the margin.
- Use correction codes in the margin (see Figure 9.6).
- Underline all errors of one type (eg all verb tense mistakes, all spelling mistakes).
- Write a letter in reply.
- Write nothing. Discuss the work with the individual students.
- Only write a comment about the **meaning** and **message** of the piece.
- Create a composite essay using good bits and problematic bits from a number of students' work. Photocopy it and hand it out for students to discuss and correct, together or in groups or individually, perhaps for homework.
- Use errors from a number of different students' writing to devise an exercise, quiz, game, etc. Or get students to create the exercise themselves based on their own mistakes (more challenging than simply copying out correct answers).
- Give a dictation based on sentences from their work.

In all of these options, there is one important guideline to bear in mind: tell students (or agree) before the writing what will happen afterwards (eg *I'll be marking tense mistakes only*).

Task 9.22 Correction codes

Some teachers like to use 'correction codes' for marking students' work.

1 In the text below, what does each code mean?
2 Why might correction codes be more useful to a learner than if the teacher had written the correction in?
3 Why have some mistakes been ignored?

Harry Greenman

The spaceship landed. A door opened. Harry the Greenman
V stumbled and fell out of the spaceship - He mumble something
WW SP that any body could understand but than a bit louder. "Myname
λ is captain Greenman and I want study your language. Who
is Director of this school?"
Frank, a tall man gave to understand that he is the boss and they
SP arranged some lessons. Next morning Frank thaught some
WW V grammar. But the lesson was very bored. Captain Greenman felt
asleep. Frank was very angry and threw the greenman back in
WO the spaceship. Suddenly came another creature out. It was Mrs
Greenman. She hit the director and turned back into the
spaceship.

Figure 9.6 Correction codes

Commentary

Codes can indicate where an error is and what type of error it is. However, they leave the learners to do some work in order to find the corrections for themselves. This may seem preferable to handing them the correction 'ready made'. It is, of course, essential that the students understand your own set of codes! In the above example, V = verb problem (possibly incorrect tense); WO = word order; WW = wrong word; λ = missing word; SP = spelling.

It often seems inappropriate to point out every error; it can be dispiriting to get back work with a large quantity of marks on it. You probably need to decide which errors you think are most important or useful for the student to work on at the moment and then to draw attention to these.

Task 9.23 Evaluating written work

Look at Figure 9.7.

1 Note some of the students' language or writing problems.
2 What classroom work might help these learners to become better writers?

MY BARENTS. SAYED GOOBY
MY. WHANT GO EARBORT. I AM
GONNING FLY. MENY HOWRES.
WHANT ARIV ~~T~~ON SUNNEDAY GONNING
LONNDEN

It was my birthday. I had really nice birthday party. It was party with my friends. I had lovely chat with friends. Although I was eating something at the party, I couldn't. I just drank. I had an absolutely wonderful time.

Next morning climate was fine. Whereas my feeling was awful with headache. I couldn't work properly. I had bad condition. Eventually I did big mistake. Customer complained at me.

At that evening I met to my friend. My friend and I had dinner. Needless to say, I didn't enjoy any more. It was absolutely bad mood. I had promised never to do anything like that again.

Figure 9.7 Student writing

Commentary

The first text has a number of serious problems:

- **orthography:** poor formation of letters, no lower-case letters;
- **punctuation:** incorrect use of full stops, no other punctuation;
- **spelling:** many mistakes in moving sound to spelling;
- **layout:** no attempt to lay text out;
- **language:** student does not have enough control of basic lexis or grammar.

These problems really prevent the writer getting his message across. The writing task set seems to have been inappropriately difficult for his level (ie 'free' writing as opposed to guided sentence making), and it looks as if insufficient help was offered in preparation for writing. It would probably be pointless to try to work through a correction or rewrite of this letter; what the student needs is a lot more practice work on a range of lexis and grammar items. He also needs some real support and guidance when attempting any future writing task and probably some practice work on forming the shapes of letters and using these in written sentences. A discussion of the subject matter of the text with the student (ie content rather than language) might be fruitful. It may be that the writer's intended meaning is clearer in spoken English than in written English.

The writer of the second text clearly has a much greater command of English. We can identify some grammar problems (eg missing articles: *a* and *the*) and some lexis problems (eg *climate* instead of *weather*). We can also notice some effective and correct uses of grammar, lexis and 'chunks' of language (eg *Needless to say, I didn't ...*). Importantly, the message that the writer wants to convey is usually quite clear; she comes over as an individual with something specific she wants to tell us.

There is, however, another problem: the text doesn't seem to flow in the way we expect a story to. There are a lot of short sentences. The repetition of words (eg *party, friends*, etc) gives the story a stilted, unnatural feel. It takes us a lot of reading to discover a small item of new information; even a sympathetic reader might soon become bored.

As well as offering some practice of specific language items (eg articles), we could also help the writer work on ways to make a written text more natural and readable: using pronouns to replace nouns, using synonyms to avoid repetition, varying the length of sentences, using conjunctions, using metaphor, etc. These are some examples of writing skills that can be focused on in the classroom.

Chapter 10 Receptive skills: listening and reading

This chapter looks at the two receptive skills, listening and reading, and explores different ways in which we can approach them. We consider what kinds of tasks will help students to improve their skills.

1 Approaches to listening

Even if someone knows all the grammar and lexis of a language, it doesn't necessarily mean that they will be able to understand a single word when it is spoken. Amongst other things, it may seem to them that:

- people speak too fast to follow;
- they can't tell where words start and stop;
- people pronounce words they just don't recognise;
- they can't work out details of what is being said;
- they can't get even a general sense of the message;
- they don't know what attitudes people are expressing;
- they can't pick out those parts that are most important for them to understand.

So, how can you help your students to become more skilful at listening?

Task 10.1 An unsatisfactory listening lesson

The following is a transcript of a short telephone conversation from the recording accompanying a contemporary coursebook. Although it has been specially recorded for students of English, it sounds reasonably authentic, ie it sounds spontaneous rather than scripted; the people are speaking at normal speed and are not making unnatural efforts to enunciate or exaggerate stress and intonation.

RECEPTIONIST:	Sayers Recruitment and Training. Can I help you?
RUBY:	Hello, yes, erm, I'm, er, I saw your advert and I'm looking for a job, I mean, I'm interested in a new job, and ...
RECEPTIONIST:	Ah, yes, you need to speak to Mrs Sayers, but I'm afraid she's not in the office right now. Could I take your name and number, and I'll ask her to call you back?
RUBY:	Er, yes, yes. The name's Ruby, Ruby Tuesday and my number is 0308557 1919.
RECEPTIONIST:	Thank you, Miss Tuesday. I'll pass on your message.
RUBY:	Thanks. Bye.
RECEPTIONIST:	Goodbye.

from *Straightforward Pre-intermediate*

Here is the opening of a lesson procedure using this material intended to help improve students' listening skills:

1 Say to students: *Listen to this.*
2 Play recording once.

3 When finished, quickly ask individual students the following questions:
   a) Who does Ruby want to speak to?
   b) What had Ruby seen?
   c) What's the full name of the company?
   d) What words did the receptionist use to explain that she would tell the other person?
4 Look coldly at students who get the answers wrong and tell them that they should have listened harder.

Apart from the insults, in what other ways might this plan be unsatisfactory?

Commentary

This lesson is a parody of some of the language lessons that I was on the receiving end of as a student in school. I remember feeling quite nervous about them. While I was listening, I knew that some comprehension questions were going to come at the end, but I never knew what the questions might be or who would be asked to answer them. The questions, anyway, seemed pointless; they were not necessarily what I would listen for if I heard the conversation in real life; it was as if the teacher was focusing me on the difficulties rather than showing me that it was possible to achieve a lot despite the difficulties. The questions seemed more of a memory test than anything else. When the recording was played, I struggled to listen to everything, and to remember all I heard, and in consequence actually remembered very little.

In fact, it's actually not necessary to understand every word in order to understand the information you might need from a recording. We need to show students this important fact – help them to worry less about understanding everything and work more on catching the bits they do need to hear. Often, when listening in everyday life, we may need to listen to:

- get a general overview of the main story or message of a conversation;
- catch specific details such as names, numbers, addresses, etc.

There is really nothing in this lesson to help a student learn to listen better; either he can already listen and remember the required answers, or he cannot. But if he wants to improve his listening, then he needs a different approach.

Task 10.2 Using a printed text with listening tasks

Here is a second version of the same lesson:

1 Hand out a copy of the text of the conversation to all students.
2 Play recording.
3 When finished, ask individual students the following questions:
   a) What does Ruby want to do?
   b) How does the receptionist help her?'

There still seems to be another problem with this. What?

Commentary

The questions are a lot more sensible, and the general tone is certainly less threatening! But the problem now is that the students don't actually need to listen at all. Giving out the text turns it into a reading exercise. Reading is usually easier for most students than deciphering the stream of speech, and most students will probably work out the answers from the printed page rather than by listening.

If I sum up my feelings about Tasks 10.1 and 10.2, I get a checklist like this:

1 The activity must really demand listening.
2 It mustn't be simply a memory test.
3 Tasks should be realistic or useful in some way.
4 The activity must actively help them to improve their listening.
5 It shouldn't be threatening.
6 It should help students work around difficulties to achieve specific results.

One way to achieve these goals is simple enough. By giving students the questions before the recording is played (rather than after), you will give students the opportunity to listen with a clear aim in mind. In everyday life, we usually have some purpose in mind when we listen: to find out today's weather, to learn something, to be entertained, to discover what John did next, etc. By giving the learners a clear purpose in listening, you turn the exercise from a memory test into a listening task.

Task 10.3 Redesigning a listening procedure

Look again at the lesson procedure in Task 10.2. Redesign it to take the checklist above into account.

Commentary

A simple plan would be as follows:

1 Set questions.
2 Play recording.
3 Check if the students have found the answers.
4 If not, play the recording again as often as necessary.

This 'question first' technique is often characterised as 'task before audio'. The word 'task' reminds us that the activity the students are asked to do may be something more useful, more realistic, more motivating than simply finding answers to comprehension questions.

Task 10.4 Selecting listening tasks

Think of a task (other than finding answers to comprehension questions) to set students before listening to the telephone enquiry at the start of this section.

Commentary

Some ideas:

- Students must decide whether the conversation is between two friends, two colleagues or two people who don't know each other.
- From a selection of telephone numbers in the book, students pick out the correct one said by the receptionist.

- Students have a newspaper page with five advertisements on it. They must decide which one is the one connected to this recording. (They might need to check company name, contact person's name, type of advertisement, etc).
- Students have a copy of the receptionist's notepad and must check it to see if she has made any errors (eg getting Ruby's name wrong).
- Students have a copy of the dialogue, but with sentences in the wrong order; they must listen and arrange them in the correct order.

The most useful tasks may be ones that require students to listen in similar ways to how they might hear such a conversation in real life. In the case of a phone enquiry like this:

- if they are the receptionist, they need to understand the general nature of the enquiry (eg someone looking for a job, not wanting to offer a job) and get accurate information from them (name, number, etc);
- if they are the caller, they might need to clearly understand any people's names or numbers they need to know and, more generally, what will happen with their enquiry (eg do they need to phone back again later?).

Choosing the right task

Remember the broad distinction between different kinds of listening:

- to get a general overview of the main story or message of a conversation;
- to catch specific details such as names, numbers, addresses, etc.

This can be reflected in tasks. Do you want students to gather specific details or to catch the gist? You can, of course, do both, but remember that it's usually better to divide these different kinds of listening into separate replays of the listening material, eg set the first task, play the recording, get feedback; then set the second task, play it again, get feedback. (There is more on sequences of tasks in the next section.)

Remember, too, not to overburden students – if you are asking them to listen and write (eg note down names, times, etc), then this is using two skills at once. Unless note-taking is a specific skill being practised, it is often better to limit the amount of writing demanded of students, especially at lower levels.

Having said all this, we must still wonder how useful, relevant or interesting it will be for your students in your location to listen to a recording of people discussing a recruitment advertisement. If you are teaching in an English-speaking country – or if your students are planning to work there – the lesson may seem more relevant than to students who are unlikely to do this at any point soon. The recording raises a few other doubts:

- In real life, you would only listen to this kind of conversation between two people if you were eavesdropping. This is arguably not the most useful listening skill we need.
- Most listening we do in real life will be interactive rather than on recorded media. We will have opportunities to respond, affect the course of the conversation, ask for clarification or repetition, etc, and we will have the chance

to see the speakers, which will allow us to get additional help from gestures, facial expressions, etc.

- In real life, although we sometimes have a clear purpose in listening, we usually won't be directed and guided by tasks that help us know what we should listen for.
- Are we really helping students to become better listeners by using recordings like this?

Despite all these doubts, a task-based approach to listening using recorded material does seem to be generally helpful in improving students' abilities. And I'm sure it's better than the memory test we started with.

2 The task–feedback circle

Many teachers use a graded sequence of tasks as a route map through a listening lesson. By starting with a simple task, letting students do it successfully, then moving on to set a more difficult task on the same recording, the teacher can virtually let the class find its own level, ie you stop setting new tasks when you find the point at which they are beginning to find it too difficult.

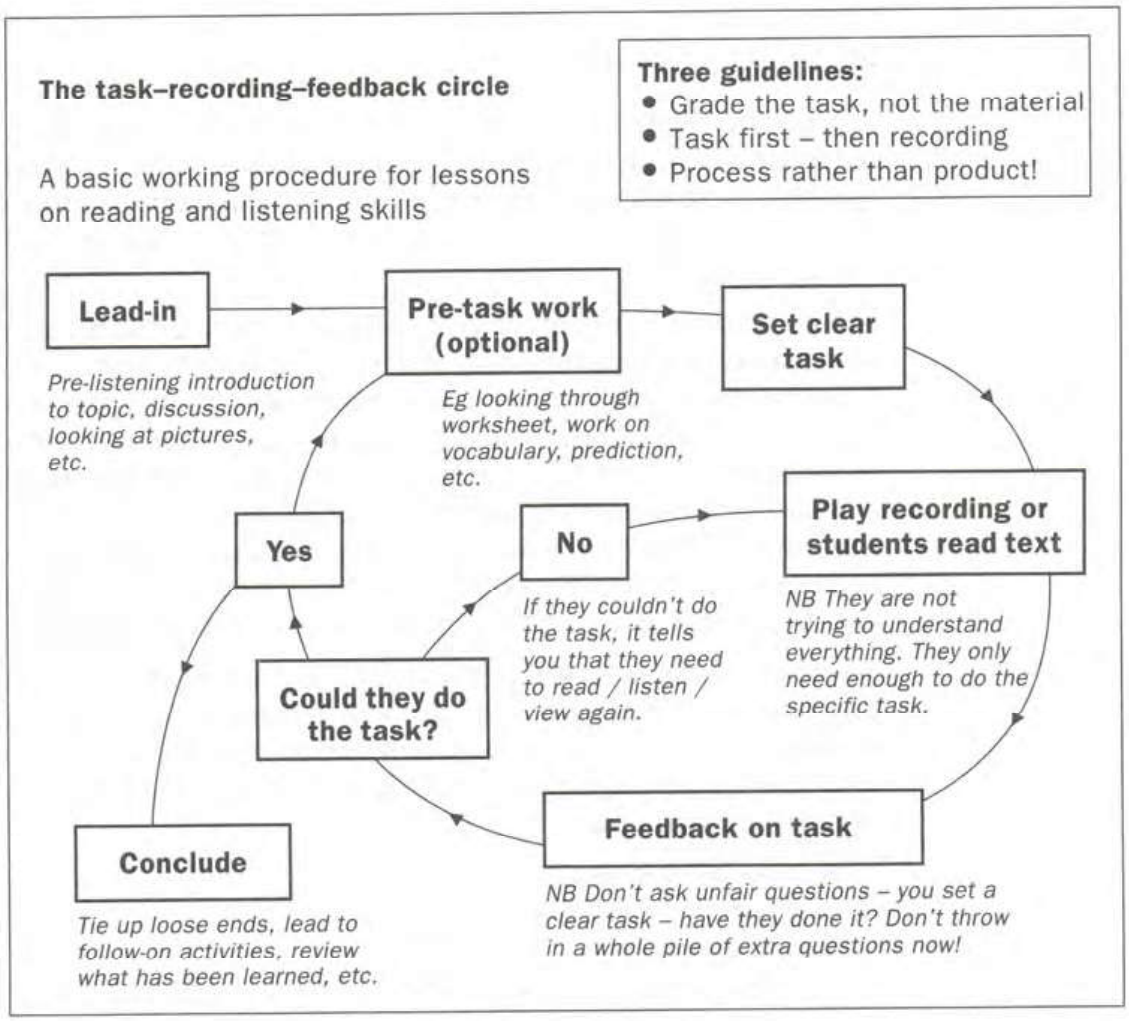

The task–recording–feedback circle
A basic working procedure for lessons on reading and listening skills
Three guidelines:
• Grade the task, not the material
• Task first – then recording
• Process rather than product!
Lead-in
Pre-listening introduction to topic, discussion, looking at pictures, etc.
Pre-task work (optional)
Eg looking through worksheet, work on vocabulary, prediction, etc.
Set clear task
Play recording or students read text
NB They are not trying to understand everything. They only need enough to do the specific task.
No
If they couldn't do the task, it tells you that they need to read / listen / view again.
Yes
Could they do the task?
Feedback on task
NB Don't ask unfair questions – you set a clear task – have they done it? Don't throw in a whole pile of extra questions now!
Conclude
Tie up loose ends, lead to follow-on activities, review what has been learned, etc.

Figure 10.1 The task–feedback circle

The task–feedback circle (see Figure 10.1) can help you plan useful listening lessons if you simply follow it round. Go round the circle three or four times – or as many times as your students need. It's important to note that it involves not only setting a sequence of tasks and checking whether they can do it, but also replaying the recording again and again (and again).

Many teachers plan their sequence of tasks from 'general' overview tasks (such as 'How many people are speaking?' 'Where are they?' 'What are they discussing?' etc) towards much more detailed, tightly focused tasks (such as 'What were the reasons for leaving on Tuesday?') ending up with language-study issues (eg 'What positive words does he use to describe the company?' 'What tenses are used in the story?' etc) (see Figure 10.2). A possible rationale for this is discussed in the next section.

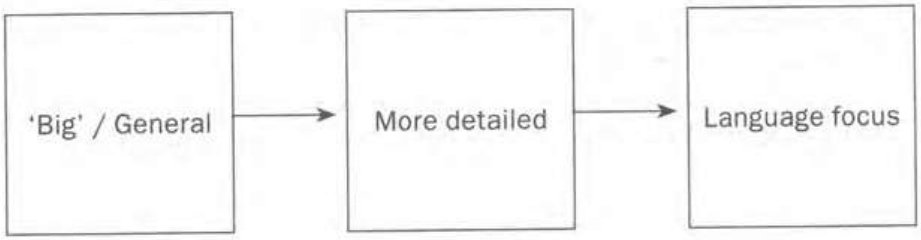


Figure 10.2 Task sequence

As a general planning aid, the task–feedback circle and the 'big to small' task sequence will work well for many standard coursebook and classroom recordings, eg where there is a radio discussion, an overheard conversation, a lecture, etc or any text where it is useful to comprehend both general overall message and smaller details.

In some cases, this might seem an inappropriate approach, for example, with texts where in real life we would only listen inattentively to the bulk of the text and just focus briefly to gain a small piece of information from a part of it that directly interests us, for example when listening to train announcements in a station or listening to a weather forecast. In such cases, it may be more useful to start straight in with a detailed question such as 'What platform should you go to for the Madrid train?' It's worth noting, though, that even in this case, you probably still need some top-down 'background' scene-setting so that listeners realise they are in a station, trying to catch a train, are going to hear an announcement, etc.

To make sure that a lesson is genuinely useful for students, we need to consider why someone might listen to such a text in real life – and what kinds of skills or strategies they'd use. We then need to design tasks that either (a) closely reflect what they might need to do in real life or (b) help them improve skills that will be useful to them in future.

Most tasks fall into one of these categories:

- Take part in a conversation;
- Answer questions;
- Do / choose something in response to what you hear;
- Pass on / take notes on what you hear.

Here are some brief examples of a range of these tasks.

Listen and ...
- argue against the proposition;
- choose the correct picture;
- listen again until you have learned the poem by heart;
- say a reply to each comment you hear;
- choose the best answer for each question from the four options;
- decide which person is saying which sentence;
- decide whether they like the present or not;
- follow the route on the map;
- walk / sit / move according to the instructions;
- draw a picture of the alien;
- label a picture of the office;
- pick up and show the correct picture;
- follow the instructions to make an origami model;
- note down the leader's suggestions about where the camp should be;
- note the exact words Chi uses to refuse the offer;
- take down the message, address and phone numbers.

Some listening tasks are obviously more difficult than others. An important point (and typically a difficult one for newer teachers to come to terms with) is that the students getting the right answer is not necessarily the most important thing! A student who finds all the correct answers on first hearing and with no difficulty has simply not been challenged by the recording. It reflects over-simple tasks and shows that little progress in listening has been made.

The effort that a student puts into listening and searching for an answer that is not easily found is, however, very useful work. Whether she finally gets the right or wrong answer is to some degree irrelevant, because in trying to get the right answer, she is stretching her powers of listening to the limit. For this reason, she will probably need to hear the recording played three, four or more times in order to get close to the target. Thus the guideline is 'process rather than product', meaning that the going is more important than the getting there. I'm not saying that getting wrong answers is good, but I am trying to steer you away from thinking that right answers are the only goal. The goal is to work on the listening itself.

Some guidelines for listening skills work in class

- Keep the recording short: two minutes of recorded material is enough to provide a lot of listening work.
- Play the recording a sufficient number of times. (This is one point that teacher trainers and supervisors often comment on when they observe teachers' lessons: the teachers did not give the students enough opportunities to hear the recording. The students found the material a lot more difficult than the teacher realised.)
- Let students discuss their answers together (perhaps in pairs).
- Don't immediately acknowledge correct answers with words or facial expressions; throw the answers back to the class: *What do you think of Claire's answer – do you agree?*
- Don't be led by one strong student. Have they all got it?
- Aim to get the students to agree together without your help, using verbal prodding, raised eyebrows, nods, hints, etc. Play the recording again whenever they need to hear it, to confirm or refute their ideas, until they agree.

- Play little bits of the recording (a word, a phrase, a sentence) again and again until it's clear.
- Give help if they are completely stuck – but still with the aim of getting them to work it out if at all possible (eg *There are three words in this sentence* or *Listen to what she says here*) rather than giving them the answers.
- Consider giving the students control of the recording – to listen when and to what they wish.
- Don't cheat them by changing your requirements halfway, ie don't set one task, but then afterwards ask for answers to something completely different!
- Don't let them lose heart. Try to make sure the task is just within their abilities. It should be difficult, but achievable. The sense of achievement in finishing a task should be great: 'It was difficult, but we did it!'

See *Feedback after an exercise* teaching technique on the DVD

The last technique above leads us to another guideline: 'Grade the task, rather than the recording.' This means 'Don't worry too much about what student level the recording is suitable for, but do make sure your task is set for the right level.' In theory, it is possible to use any recording – for example, a recording of this morning's radio news – with any level. At Beginner level, I could ask them to catch the names of every famous person they heard. It would be challenging and stimulating for a beginner to feel he has got something out of an authentic news recording! At a much higher level, I could expect them to be able to understand most of the recording and do a sophisticated task like picking out unstressed words. In both cases, it is not the recording that sets the level of the lesson; it is the task.

In practice, of course, some recordings are naturally going to seem more appropriate for specific student level. Thus a recording of someone asking for directions in the street is more likely to be usable at a lower level than, say, a discussion on complex moral issues.

Task 10.5 Ordering stages in a listening lesson

Here is a lesson to exemplify the techniques described above. The recording is a conversation between two people in a bus station. At one point, we hear the announcer list the buses about to depart. The lesson plan is out of order; put the items back into their original order.

a Play recording; students then compare answers in pairs; tell me their answer. If correct, continue; if not, play recording again, etc.
b Play recording; students then compare answers in pairs; tell me their answer. If correct, continue; if not, play recording again, etc.
c Play recording; students then compare answers in pairs and give their answer. If correct, continue; if not, play recording again, etc.
d Lead into a communicative activity based around the topic of travel problems.
e Set task: 'How many people are speaking?' 'Where are they?'
f Introduce topic: long-distance buses; discuss a little: 'Anyone been on one in England or the United States?'
g Set task: 'Here is your bus ticket' (different destinations for different students). 'Which bus number must you catch?'

h Set task: 'Why is the old lady worried?' 'What suggestion would you make?' (The task requires listening to and interpreting a longish section of the recording.)
i Show picture of bus station. 'Where do you think this is?' 'What's happening?' etc.

Commentary

The original order is: (i), (f), (e), (a), (g), (b), (h), (c), (d). The stages (a), (b) and (i) are, of course, interchangeable. This order shows a logical progression from an introduction to a very simple first task (to give students confidence), through to a more difficult task (requiring recognition of the pronunciation of a town name and a bus number) and finally to a demanding task involving interpretation of a much longer piece of speech. By the time students start to listen intently for this, they will already have heard the recording a number of times, and the final task should therefore be that much easier. Even the weakest student will also go away with a feeling of having achieved something (eg one of the earlier tasks), even if he couldn't get the last one perfectly.

3 How do we listen?

When we listen, we use a variety of strategies to help us pick up the message. Some of these are connected with understanding the 'big' picture, eg gaining an overview of the structure of the whole text, getting the gist (the general meaning), using various types of previous knowledge to help us make sense of the message, etc. Listening in this way is sometimes termed 'gist listening' or 'extensive listening'. Other strategies are connected with the small pieces of the text, eg correctly hearing precise sounds, working out exactly what some individual words are, catching precise details of information, etc. This is often called 'listening for detail'.

When working on listening in the classroom there are two alternative starting points; working on the 'small pieces' (sounds, words and details) or on the 'big pieces, (background topics, overall structure and organisation). The former is known as top-down whilst the latter is known as bottom-up.

Top-down and bottom-up

It used to be believed that listeners built up their understanding of a text by working out what each individual sound was, then adding these up into a word, understanding the word, checking the meaning of that word with the words around them, etc (a bit like building up a wall from the individual bricks). Although this theory, known as 'bottom-up' (ie building up the messages from the individual small pieces), may initially sound appealing, it is virtually impossible to do.

Spoken English probably comes at you too fast to be able to adopt such an item-by-item approach on its own. It seems likely that we make use of 'bottom-up' skills more to fill in missing gaps rather than as a general approach to comprehension word by word.

The alternative theory is that when we listen to a new dialogue, we start processing the text using skills associated with a second theory ('top-down'), ie making use of what we already know to help us predict the structure and content of the text, and getting a general overall impression of the message.

Task 10.6 Top-down and bottom-up

Do the following represent use of top-down or bottom-up strategies?

1 Before we start listening, we can already predict some possible words and phrases that might be used because of our knowledge of lexical sets associated with the topic.
2 We listen carefully to a recording a number of times so that we can find a word we can't catch clearly.
3 When we don't clearly catch some of what people say, we hypothesise what we have missed and reinstate what we think was there, based on our knowledge of similar conversations.
4 We know the typical pattern some interactions follow (eg the typical sequence of exchanges when ordering a taxi on the phone), and this helps us to understand these when they are spoken.

Commentary

Strategy 2 is bottom-up. Strategies 1, 3 and 4 are examples of top-down strategies, and we do a lot more of this kind of processing that you might expect. Using background knowledge, prediction and 'filling-in' gaps are all important listening skills.

We don't come to a new piece of listening completely from a 'zero' starting point. We bring our previous knowledge to it, even before it's started. Making a good prediction of the content or the shape of a listening text will definitely help us to make better sense of it when it happens.

Things that could help include:

- having some idea what the topic being discussed will be;
- knowing something about that topic;
- knowing the typical sequence of exchanges that is used in a dialogue like this;
- predicting issues likely to be raised;
- being quickly able to get an overview of the general direction of the conversation;
- knowing any general rules or guidelines for what can / can't be said in conversations of this type;
- understanding the attitudes of the participants;
- knowing some words or phrases that are commonly used in conversations of this type.

Making a good prediction of the content or the shape of a listening text will definitely help us to make better sense of it when it happens. Rather than having to start from scratch, the listening may fall neatly into an imagined framework we have already set out for it. Of course, we can't be ready for

everything, but anything that we have correctly expected frees up our energy to pay attention to things that require more intensive listening. This is summed up in Figure 10.3.

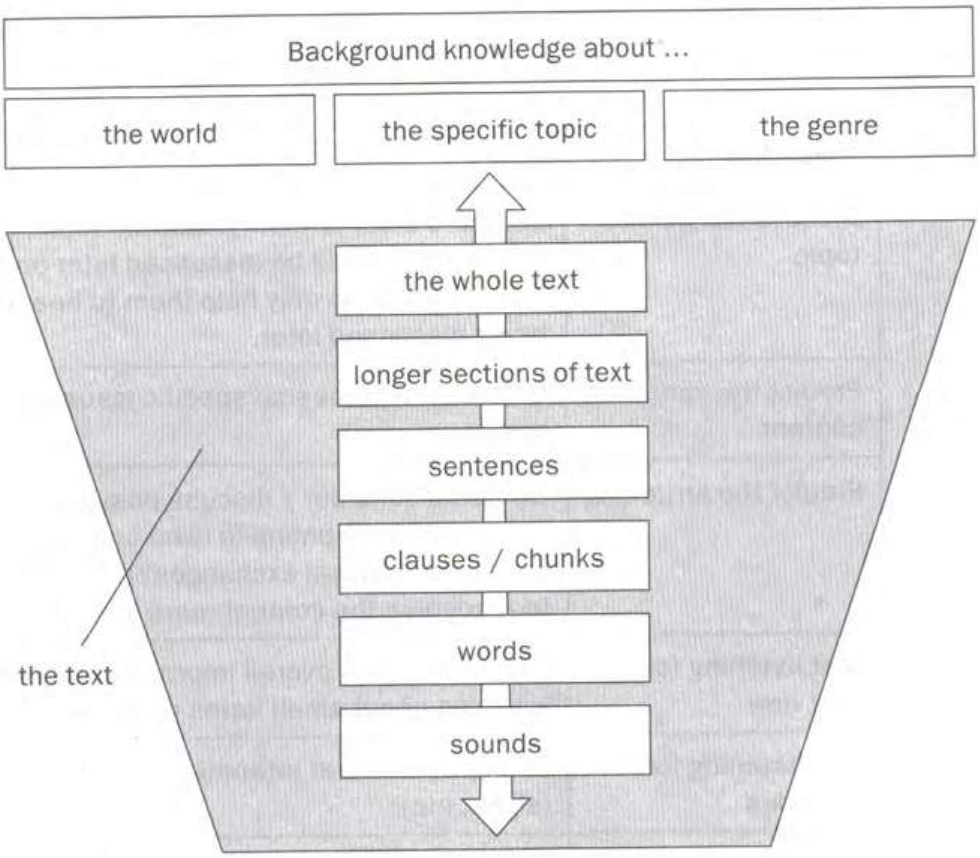


Figure 10.3 Geography of a listening text

Top-down and bottom-up in the classroom

When we listen, we probably adopt a continually varying combination of top-down and bottom-up strategies, so work on both areas is useful to learners. I suspect that when I listen, I often process chunk by chunk, catching the general meaning of a small segment of text and, if necessary (eg if something isn't clear), go back over and review the temporarily stored segment (from short-term memory) and analyse more carefully what its components were.

You need to decide your own personal theory about how people listen so that you can plan lessons to reflect this. Many teachers nowadays believe that we mainly listen 'top-down' in real life, and so structure lesson sequences starting with top-down work.

A typical classroom listening lesson (for example using a radio phone-in programme on traffic congestion) might involve a sequence of tasks that move from the top to the bottom part of the diagram shown in Figure 10.3. (NB You are unlikely to use all of these in a single lesson.)

Figure 10.4 shows a possible route map through such a lesson, starting from the 'big' background and overview tasks and moving towards the 'smaller', more detail-focused and language-focused issues.

Don't take such a map as a fixed 'right way' to do things; but it's certainly worth trying out as an experiment if you generally approach listening (or reading) texts in a different way, say by jumping straight in with a focus on detail.

Procedure	Why?
Discuss the general topic	Learners start to think about the topic, raising a number of issues that will be discussed later on the recording. This preparation may help them to hear these things being discussed later.
Predict the specific content	Students hypothesise specific issues that may be raised.
Predict the structure	Students consider / discuss possible organisational structures for a phone-in (who speaks? what kind of questions? typical exchanges?). This may help learners to recognise the content more easily.
Gist listening for overview	Learners get an overall impression of the content without worrying about small items or individual words.
Gist listening for attitudes	Learners interpret intonation, paralinguistic features (sighs, etc).
More careful listening for complex meanings	By catching and interpreting smaller parts of the text, learners fine-tune their understanding.
Listening to pick out specific small language details	This focused work (eg on pronunciation) may raise learner awareness (eg of weak forms) and thus help students to listen better in future.

Figure 10.4 Possible route map for a listening lesson

Task 10.7 Planning a top-down procedure

Find a listening text (eg in an upcoming unit of your coursebook). For the moment, ignore any tasks and exercises printed in the book. Plan an original **top-down** lesson using the procedure above.

4 Listening ideas

In this section, I'll suggest some ideas for more adventurous listening activities.

News headlines

One interesting and popular example of a lesson using the task–feedback circle (see Section 2 of this chapter) is to use up-to-date material recorded off the radio. Many teachers regularly record the news headlines each morning for classroom use. The *Worksheet for news headlines* resource on the DVD gives a complete lesson procedure that you can use with any recording of the day's news headlines (NB headlines only, not complete stories; the recording should be less than a minute long). This lesson would be suitable for most classes at Intermediate level or above. Remember to set tasks before each listening and to replay the recording as often as necessary in order for the students to find the answers to one task, before moving on to the next.

Jigsaw listening

No wonder this technique is a teachers' favourite! You can run listening activities that allow learners to work at their own speed, controlling the CD player or tape recorder themselves and repeatedly playing parts of a text until they are really happy with their understanding of it. It also involves a lot of message-oriented communication and useful group cooperation.

Here's the basic idea:

- Working in small groups, learners listen to separate small parts of a longer recording, ie each group hears different things.
- They then meet up, perhaps in pairs, threes or fours, with people from groups that listened to other parts of the recording.
- They report to each other on what they have heard and compare ideas and reach a conclusion or consensus or complete some specific task. The task might be simply to construct a full picture of the recording's contents.

To run a jigsaw task, a little technical preparation is required:

- You'll usually need a separate CD player for each group to listen on and the same number of separate recordings.
- To make sure that students cannot accidentally hear parts of the recording from other groups' sections, you might need to rerecord and edit some recordings (if your coursebook doesn't offer ready-made materials).

Jigsaw task ideas

Three (or more) slightly different viewpoints of a single event, each on a separate recording. The task is to work out what actually happened. Useful additional materials might be a location map or diagram of a room. Example events:

- witnesses of a crime
- accident reports
- finding where someone might have lost their purse
- working out exactly who was at a meeting (*I met Jay and Frieda* ..., etc)
- working out the sequence of events (what happened first, second, etc)

- a news story with additional (or varying) details in each separate section
- a description of a place or people (to get the complete picture, students will need to put together information from all sections)
- a party
- an office
- a factory process
- 'diary' information from three people (eg when / where they are doing things); the listening task could be to choose a time and place for a meeting

The gallery

A variation on jigsaw listening. Find about ten interesting short jokes, stories, advertisements or poems (not more than a minute long) and record yourself reading them, each onto a different CD. Borrow two or three extra CD players and place them at different locations around the room. Put two or three of your CDs next to each machine. Make sure learners know how to operate the machines. Then invite learners to wander freely around the different places, changing CD or location at will, with the aim of choosing their favourite recording. Make sure they play recordings softly and that they don't all gather round one machine, but otherwise leave the control of the activity to them. Afterwards, get feedback on what they enjoyed or learned.

Home recording

Many teachers have found that it's interesting and useful to make their own short recordings for classroom use. This gives you the chance to offer listening topics directly relevant to your course or of interest to your learners. A popular tactic is to 'interview' one or two other teachers in the staff room.

When you ask colleagues if they can help, warn them how much time it might require. It's often possible to do the whole process of briefing, rehearsal and recording in about ten minutes.

You can have completely unscripted, improvised, 'natural' conversations, but it often works better if you give your speaker(s) a briefing on:

- what you want them to talk about;
- any particular points that should be mentioned;
- language items you would really like included (eg *Please use lots of present perfect!*) or avoided (eg *Don't use the past progressive if you can help it*);
- how fast and clearly you want them to speak (eg normal speed or slower).

One useful strategy is to offer speakers a set of brief written notes – just the key words – to help them remember the structure of the conversation. Alternatively, you could fully script the text of recordings, so that the speakers just read this aloud. It's usually worth doing one quick rehearsal or 'read-through' before recording.

NB Making a home recording will take some of your time and it can be quite hard to make a voice recording of good enough audio quality to stand up to playing in some classrooms.

Live listening

One activity that has grown in popularity in recent years is 'live listening'. The basic idea is straightforward: students get to listen to real people speaking in class, rather than to recordings. Here's a way of trying this:

- When you find that your coursebook has a fairly dull listening text coming up, instead of using the recording, invite a colleague with a spare five minutes to come into your class.
- Make sure the class has a clear task while listening, eg to note down the main points that each speaker makes.
- Sit in front of the learners and have a live 'ordinary' conversation on the same topic as the book.

Though there is certainly a lot of value in getting a variety of visitors with different vocal styles into your class, you can do live listenings on your own, too: reading or improvising conversations in your own voice, or 'acting' a range of characters yourself. The following activity could be done using a visitor or by yourself.

Guest stars

Prepare notes for a short monologue in character (a famous pop star or celebrity). In class, announce that a guest star is coming today, but don't say who it is. Go out of the room and return 'in character' (or invite another colleague in). The 'guest' then chats naturally for a minute or two in character, about her life, a typical day, how she feels, etc. The learners should listen and not shout out who they think it is, but instead write down their guess. At the end of the monologue, let them compare their guesses in small groups (giving reasons) and then check with you. When they know who the guest is, they could briefly ask a few more interview questions to the character. Repeat the activity with different 'guests' as a regular slot in your lessons. (Maybe students could play the 'guest', too.)

5 Approaches to reading

Reading to oneself (as opposed to reading aloud) is, like listening, a 'receptive' skill, and similar teaching procedures can be used to help learners. The task–feedback circle works equally well with reading texts, and many of the guidelines given in Section 2 are also easily adaptable.

The most obvious differences are to do with the fact that people read at different speeds and in different ways. Whereas a recording takes a definite length of time to play through, in a reading activity, individuals can control the speed they work at and what they are looking at.

Task 10.8 Difficulties when reading a foreign language

What are your own main problems when trying to read a text in a language that you don't know very well?

Commentary

Maybe:

- I don't know enough vocabulary.
- I need the dictionary all the time.
- It's very slow – it takes ages just to get through a few sentences.
- I often get to the stage where I understand all the individual words, but the whole thing eludes me completely.
- Because it's slow, the pleasure or interest in the subject matter is soon lost.

Many learners approach reading texts expecting to read them thoroughly and to stop only when they have understood every word. Clearly, there is value in this as a way of improving their vocabulary and their understanding of grammar, but, as with listening, this kind of approach does not necessarily make them into better readers, because this plodding, word-by-word approach is not the way that we most often do our reading in real life. In order to make students better readers, we need first of all to raise their awareness that it's not always essential to understand every word, and that practising some different reading techniques in English may be very useful to them. And if their basic strategy is to read slowly and ponderously, then a good first strategy could be to help them learn to read fast; not worrying about understanding every word; not, perhaps, even understanding most words, but still achieving a specific and useful goal.

Reading for detail

A lot of in-class reading work has traditionally been 'reading for detail' – or 'intensive reading', ie reading texts closely and carefully with the intention of gaining an understanding of as much detail as possible. Often this is so that the student can answer comprehension questions (eg *Why did the three men go into the office?*) This is typically a stop / start kind of reading, involving going back over small pieces of the same text a number of times to find out more and more about it, making sure that the words have been correctly interpreted. This is how a competent language user might read an instruction manual for a piece of flat-pack furniture or a leaflet with guidelines on whether they have to pay income tax or not. It's not the way she would typically read a chapter from a novel or a magazine article, although, in classrooms, it is often how students are asked to process such material (with true / false and other comprehension questions to check if they can pick up specific points).

In everyday life, we tend to do much more extensive reading, ie fluent, faster reading, often of longer texts, for pleasure, entertainment and general understanding, but without such careful attention to the details. When we don't understand words or small sections, we usually just keep going, maybe only coming back when there has been a major breakdown in our understanding.

There is certainly a place for intensive reading in class, helping students to uncover and accurately understand details in a text – but this is by no means the

only strategy that a good reader needs. Being able to read fast and fluently is also very important.

Skimming and scanning

Many activities designed to increase reading speeds are variations on the following two ideas:

- Skimming = Read quickly to get the gist of a passage (eg to discover key topics, main ideas, overall theme, basic structure, etc). A typical skimming task would be a general question from the teacher, such as *Is this passage about Jill's memories of summer or winter?* or *Is this story set in a school or a restaurant?* The learners would attempt to find the answer quickly, without reading every word of the passage, by 'speed-reading' through some portions of the text.
- Scanning = Move eyes quickly over the text to locate a specific piece of information (eg a name, address, fact, price, number, date, etc) without reading the whole text or unpacking any subtleties of meaning. A common scanning activity is searching for information in a leaflet or directory, and a typical scanning task would be *What time does the Birmingham train leave?* or *What does Cathy take with her to the meeting?*

Skimming and scanning are both 'top-down' skills (see Section 3 earlier in this chapter). Although scanning is involved with finding individual points from the text without reading carefully through every word of the text, the way that a reader finds that information involves some degree of processing of the overall shape and structure of the text, moving her eyes quickly over the whole page, searching for key words or clues from the textual layout and the content that will enable her to focus in on smaller sections of text that she is likely to get answers from.

Task 10.9 Selecting an appropriate reading task

Imagine that you have given students a copy of a tourist leaflet publicising a nearby town and advertising local attractions, museums, special events and with information on prices, opening times, etc. What would be a suitable task to get students to read this quickly (rather than read every word)?

Commentary

You probably want tasks that encourage students to search for specific small sections of text which they then read more carefully to find a required piece of information. These might be factual, information questions such as 'When does the Military Museum close?' 'Can I take my dog into Chapultepec Park?' 'What is a good souvenir to take back from this region?' 'How much would it cost for a family of four to go swimming?' 'What are the newest animals in the zoo?'

Students doing this will be reading the material in a similar way to how people might read it in everyday life.

Task 10.10 Choosing useful reading activities

Which of the following seem to be useful reading activities and which not? Why? Briefly work out an alternative procedure for the less satisfactory ones.

1 The class reads a whole page of classified advertisements in the newspaper, using their dictionaries to look up all unknown words.

2 Students are each looking at an online page from a newspaper. Ask them to find the word *over* somewhere on the front page.
3 Place a pile of local tourist leaflets on the table and explain that students, in groups of four, can plan a day out tomorrow.
4 Students read a short extract from a novel and answer five multiple-choice comprehension questions about fine points of detail.

Commentary

One test for useful reading (or listening work) might be to check how far tasks reflect real-life uses of the same text. If a text is used in class in ways that are reasonably similar to real life, it is likely that the task will be effective.

Procedure 1 seems unsatisfactory because it is an unrealistic use of the advertisements; in real life, no one would read them in such a way. A more realistic task would require them to scan the ads for specific items (as we do when we want, say, to buy a second-hand TV). So 'What is the best TV I could buy?' would be a far more realistic task.

Procedure 2 is similarly strange. This is a scanning exercise, but an entirely unrealistic one. We might well scan a newspaper looking for names of people or countries that we wanted to read about or headings that directed us to information we needed (such as weather), but it seems unlikely that we would search for a single word like *over* (though as a game, it could be fun). For a more useful scanning task, students could be asked to find where specific articles are or find certain factual information. Skimming tasks would also be useful, to get the gist of an article for example.

Procedure 3, although it perhaps appears a little strange initially, is in fact a very interesting reading activity. The students will be using the leaflets for precisely the purpose for which they were written, and will be reading them in order to obtain a whole range of appropriate ideas and information: seeing what's available, checking opening times, prices, etc. As a bonus, there will be a lot of speaking as well as reading.

Procedure 4 describes an exercise commonly found in exams. It is clearly useful as a demanding way of testing comprehension, and is useful for studying the fine shades of meaning a writer conveys. It is, however, important to ensure that this kind of activity is not the only reading work done, partly because it seems to be confirming to students that this is the normal (or only) way to read a novel. Students also need to be shown approaches to a novel that allow them to read fluently, at speed, without worrying about catching every nuance.

Real-life purposes are not the only way of measuring the usefulness of classroom reading work. Often we might want to train students in specific reading techniques or strategies, things that will help their future reading, even if the immediate classroom work doesn't itself reflect a real-life purpose.

Top-down reading

As with listening lessons, many reading lessons move from 'big' to 'small', ie 'top-down' – from overview to details. Using the task–feedback circle as a starting point, we can plan a route map for a basic reading lesson (Figure 10.5).

Pre-text	1	Introduction and lead-in, eg get the learners interested in the topic, initial discussion of key themes, make an explicit link between the topic of the text and students' own lives and experiences, focus on important language that will come in the text
	2	First task (pre-reading), eg predict from some extracted information (illustration, key words, headlines), read questions about the text, students compose their own questions
Text	3	Tasks to focus on fast reading for gist (skimming), eg check text against predictions made beforehand, guess the title from a choice of three options, put events (or illustrations) in the correct order
	4	Tasks to focus on fast reading to locate specific information (scanning)
	5	Tasks to focus on meaning (general points), eg answer questions about meaning, make use of information in the text to do something (make a sketch, fill out a form, find out which picture is being described, etc), discuss issues, summarise arguments, compare viewpoints
	6	Tasks to focus on meaning (finer points of detail, more intensive comprehensive understanding)
	7	Tasks to focus on individual language items, eg vocabulary or grammar exercises, use of dictionaries, work out meaning of words from context
Post-text	8	Follow-on task, eg role play, debate, writing task (eg write a letter in reply), personalisation (eg 'Have you ever had an experience like this one?')
	9	Closing, eg draw the lesson to a conclusion, tie up loose ends, review what has been studied and what has been learned

Figure 10.5 Possible route map for a reading lesson

Here are some specific ideas for reading tasks

- Put these illustrations of the text in the correct order.
- Put these cut-up paragraphs in the correct order.
- Find words in the text that mean the same as the words in this list.
- Read the text and find the mistakes in this illustration (or draw your own).
- Read the text and make a list of particular items (eg jobs that need doing, the author's proposals, advantages and disadvantages, etc).
- Give a headline to each section of the article (or match given headlines with the sections).
- Find appropriate places in the text to reinsert some sentences that have previously been separated from the text.

- Write a reply.
- Look at the title and the illustrations (but not the text). Predict which of the following list of words you will find in the text.
- Solve the problem.
- Discuss (or write) the missing last paragraph of the text.
- Discuss interpretations of, reactions to, feelings about the text.
- Make notes under the following headings: ...
- Before you read this text, make notes about what you already know about the subject.
- Act out the dialogue, story, episode, etc.
- Put this list of events in the correct order.

For ideas on using reading to help teach grammar, see Chapter 7.

6 Extensive reading

There is a great deal of evidence that **extensive reading** (ie reading longer texts, such as a novel, over time) has a powerful impact on language learning. The more someone reads, the more they pick up items of vocabulary and grammar from the texts, often without realising it, and this widening language knowledge seems to increase their overall linguistic confidence, which then influences and improves their skills in other language areas, too (though this is probably only true in cases where the material they read is self-chosen and is genuinely relevant and interesting to them).

So, there are strong arguments for actively encouraging students to read a lot in the target language, both in and outside the classroom. We can help by:

- providing a library of readers (see below), magazines, newspapers, leaflets, etc;
- training learners how to select suitable reading material and in ways to read it;
- creating a 'book club' environment that encourages learners to choose what books to purchase, talk about favourite books, share them with each other, write brief recommendations, etc;
- allowing sections of classroom time purely for students to read; some teachers who have five or six lessons a week set aside one of these lessons as quiet reading time.

A library doesn't need to be large. It can be something as simple as a small box of books and magazines. However, it's important to include items that are relevant and suitable for your class. Unabridged old copies of worthy classics are probably not a good choice. Better to have a few recent magazines on themes that students like (eg films, pop stars, computer games, etc for a teen class) and a small set of graded readers.

Readers

These are books of stories (or other content) published specifically for learners to get extended exposure to English. They often have their grammar and vocabulary 'graded' to named levels (eg Elementary) so that learners at that level should stand a reasonable chance of successfully reading them. Many state the size of vocabulary

used and have footnotes or glossaries of words outside their stated word limit. The main aim of readers is to provide opportunities for extensive reading for pleasure. For this reason, be careful about integrating comprehension checks, tests and exercises into your teaching. As far as possible, let students read, enjoy and move on, rather than read and then have to do lots of exercises afterwards. There are ideas for some creative extensive reading activities at the end of this section.

Task 10.11 Reading round the class

Readers can be read outside class or can be used in 'quiet reading' class time. Some teachers use them in class for reading aloud, with different students reading short sections one after the other. This reading aloud 'round the class' is something many of us recall from our schooldays. Why might this popular technique not be effective?

Commentary

- I read faster than he speaks.
- It's so boring.
- She makes mistakes.
- I've already read to page 37 myself.
- He can't pronounce it and he gets embarrassed.
- I'm so nervous about reading, I miss the story.
- I can't follow the story with all these different people speaking.
- I prefer to read to myself.
- It's going to be 35 minutes till my go.
- It gets in the way of me hearing the voices of the characters.
- It's not good practice for speaking – I'd never talk like that!

Obviously a fluent reader with the ability to inject life and feeling into the reading is a wonderful bonus. Most students, however, do not fit this description, and round-the-class reading tends to be a slow, tedious turn-off rather than a rouser of enthusiasm.

Some alternatives to reading aloud round the class

Here are some alternatives to try:

- You read;
- You read narrative, but students read character dialogue;
- You (having read the chapter yourself before class) tell the story in your own words, without notes, in the most spell-binding way you can; later, you get students to do the same with other bits;
- Students read to each other in small groups or pairs, stopping, changing, discussing and helping each other whenever they want to;
- Students read silently, then, without discussion, act out, improvising a scene based on what happened;
- Students silently speed-read a chapter (say in two minutes) then report back, discussing, comparing, etc before silently reading it more carefully.

Extensive reading activities

The following ideas are some slightly more unusual activities based around interpreting and enjoying readers in class:

- Don't always start at the beginning! Try jumping in at the middle and reading one page. Predict what happened before, who the people are, where they are, etc. Or use a contents page similarly.
- Use a key section of the story as a dictation.
- Create a situation quite separate from the story of the book and allow students to improvise to see how the characters would behave in a totally different environment or time. The Forsytes watching TV together? Jane Eyre applying to get a temporary secretarial job? Not quite as silly as it sounds – this is a very exciting way to investigate character.
- Students draw the picture of the scene. When finished, they compare and discuss their different interpretations.
- Interviews: one student is a chat show host or a newspaper reporter and interviews another student in the role of a character. 'So why did you do that?' 'What do you really think about Joseph?' etc. Or get all the characters together and interview them. Similarly, put the characters 'on trial' in a courtroom: 'Whose fault was it?'
- Map the story (or one chapter). Draw lines on it to show different characters' movements. Or map out the relationships between characters. A good classroom poster?
- Keep a character's diary.
- Review the book for a TV programme. Meet the author. Discuss, argue. Phone-in callers can ask questions.
- Would it make a good film? The students are the board of directors for a film company. They need to decide whether the book is film material or not. How does the story need to be changed? How can they make it more exciting? Who should direct it? Who should play the parts? Make an advertisement poster for the film.
- What did the front page of the local newspaper look like on the day when ...?
- Choose a page or paragraph from the next chapter in the book and blank out some words. Students need to guess what is going to happen by trying to find the missing words.
- Redesign the cover of the book. Write the blurb on the back cover.

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